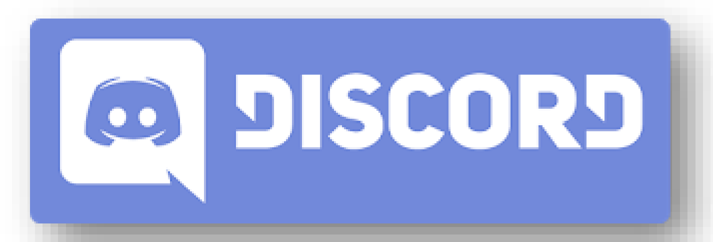

天鏡のアルデラミン
Alderamin on the Sky VI
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
Illustration 竜徹
VI
電撃文庫

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ヤトリシノ・イグセム
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍中尉。旧軍閥の名家イグセム家出身で、文武両道の少女。クーデターが勃発したことで、イクタたち騎士団から離脱する。
マシュー・テトジリチ
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍少尉。高等学校時代からイクタやヤトリを敵対視していたが、戦場を共に戦う中で、次第に仲間意識を強く抱くようになる。
シャミーユ・キトラ・カトヴァンマニニク
カトヴァーナ帝国の第三皇女。皇室の人間らしい威厳を漂わせる一方で、媚びない愛らしさも併せもつ。イクタと出会い、運命が変わっていく。
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トルウェイ・レミオン
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍中尉。爽やかでシャイな二枚目。イグセム家と並び立つ旧軍閥の名家の三男坊。父がクーデターを起こし、思い悩むことに。
ハローマ・ベッケル
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍少尉。表情も口調も柔らかな少女。優しい性格ゆえに、しばしばイクタに口説かれる。戦場では、優秀な衛生兵として活躍。
センパ・サザルーフ
カトヴァーナ帝国陸軍少佐。部下思いの有能な軍人。北域動乱でイクタたちと出会って以来、腐れ縁のように彼らと行動をともにすることになる。

Prologue

What to discard, and what to choose. The young man always knew that he was bad at making such decisions.

He wasn't afraid of the responsibility that comes from making his choice. He would gladly accept any sin or punishment if that could settle the matter. If he was the one on either side of the weighing scale, he would think of it as a salvation since it simplifies matters.

But if that wasn't so– for example, if what he had to weigh on both sides were the lives of his subordinates…

His mind would stall for a moment. He couldn't abandon one side or save the other. It was so easy for him to imagine himself standing stiff from indecision that it was pitiful.

As the commander of a large number of subordinates, this hesitation could prove fatal. But if that was so, how did this young man overcome all these battles and survived for so long?

Thinking back, he realized – that's because he passed the decision on to others.

All the harsh decisions were made by the dark haired youth and vermillion haired girl.

It was the same this time, the one who made the decision wasn't him, but his two beloved comrades.

With the resolve to give up on many things, the vermillion haired girl left before his eyes. By giving him the third option which allowed him to hold on to many things, the dark haired youth saved him from the dead end of indecision.

… However, the youth realized that wasn't true.

In order to make that decision, the dark haired youth gave up more than anyone else. With deep resolve, that youth gave up the way he had lived all this while— the way Ikuta Solork lived his life.

And he was just following that youth once again. Just like a moth drawn to the fire, he followed him unsteadily from behind.

Stalling on making a decision, and letting others make the decision for him. He pretended to not know as he let his comrade shoulder the pain.

… He remained like this.

Can he really call himself their comrade if he remained like this?

Can Torway Remeon claim to be a part of the 「Knight Order」?

— If you can't pull the trigger at the crucial moment, you won't be able to protect anything.

The admonishment from his older brother echoed in his ear. He remembered his brother's cold gaze that was a mixture of mockery and disappointment.

In order to refute this criticism, the youth went through much hardships. He practiced shooting, learned tactics, and pushed the establishment of a new type of military combat to the next level.

He became a skilled sniper, and could deliver death to his enemy from great distance.

On the battlefield he saw through his scope, his precious comrades would always be covered in wounds as they engaged the enemy from up close.

His heart was with them, and had braced himself for any injury on the battlefield. Because he believed this wholeheartedly, he could treat them as equals.

However— if that was true, then why were they always the ones covered in wounds?

If his heart was with them, then why couldn't he say anything as he watched the back of the vermillion haired girl? Why had he not shared the dark haired youth's pain?

The jade eyed youth wondered about his obligation as a descendent of the Remeon house. His raison d'etre as a member of the Knight Order, a comrade of Ikuta Solork, and an ally of Yatorishino Igsem. The reason he had been fighting all this while.

What am I protecting? Who am I fighting? He had to be clear about the answers to these questions.

Chapter 1

Eruption

This day started no different from any other. That was true for most people living in the Imperial capital.

The intense sunlight showed no signs of waning, and the pedestrians on the streets were full of life. There were people bustling around the streets everywhere.

People taking a stroll and shopping, customers haggling the price at the stalls— the largest city in Katjvarna was the same as usual.

「Hey, make way~ wagon coming through!」

The wagon laden with goods split the crowd as it drove through the streets. The travelling merchant Horuhido didn't care about the eyes of the crowd and burped drunkenly.

「Gahh, I drank too much last night… I was planning to set off in the morning, but dragged onto noon. I'm suppose to send the goods to the next province by today too.」

「Drink more water, Horuhido. You look pale.」

His water sprite partner said out of concern, and Horuhido held a cup near the sprite's 「water spout」 on it's torso. Plain water filled the cup, and he drank the entire glass. The refreshing feeling flowing down his throat spread to his brain:

「Haaah! I'm awake now, thanks Nim.」

His mind that was groggy from a hangover became clear, and Horuhido tightened the grip on the reins… However, he couldn't make the horse go faster on the crowded road, and it trotted on at walking pace. At this moment, a merchant he was acquainted with called out to him:

「Yo～Horuhido, I never thought we will meet again so soon. Aren't you supposed to set off in the morning?」

「Shut up, Kinjasha. It’s all because you dragged me off drinking last night. How are you going to compensate me if I missed this business opportunity?」

「Hehe, you are the one who agreed to go drinking… By the way, what cargo are you sending this time?」

「Like I said last night, it’s mainly cloth dyed in Kaminu. It is growing out of fashion in the capital, but there is still a market for it in the other provinces. I also have a whole wagon of spices from the south.」

「Hey, be careful there. You messed up really badly the last time you loaded spices together with cloth. You were not adequately prepared for rain, and the smell and colour of the spice ran onto the cloth…」

「Stop bringing up the mistakes I made during my rookie years! Look carefully, I wrapped all my goods in leather!」

Horuhido shouted while pointing at his cargo. His old acquaintance laughed at that:

「I see, that’s a relief… Sigh, let’s make as much money as we can for now. The war never ends, and the government only cares about collecting taxes. If you don’t put your back into it, you might not be able to earn a living.」

「You don’t have to remind me. After selling the cloth, I will be going to the east and making some money off the soldiers. The harder the war, the better tea leaves and medical supplies will sell.」

「If you aren’t careful, your entire wagon might get confiscated. You have to cash out while you are ahead!」

「Stop being so nosy, just how long are you going to nag about this?」

Horuhido retorted harshly and grunted. Their conversation was over, but Kinjasha seemed set on sending his junior off, and

continued walking alongside the wagon. Moments later, they saw the city's exit, but—

「… Huh? H-Hey, what's going on?」

A group of men in military attire had set up a roadblock ahead. The two merchants looked at each other, and before they could even ask anything, the soldiers already warned them harshly:

「You two over there, halt! Citizens are prohibited from leaving the capital without authorization. Turn back to the city right now.」

「Huh?」

Horuhido was shocked. He thought they were just checking for contrabands, but the soldiers denied him exit without even looking at the cargo. Unable to accept this, he shot back:

「W-What's going on here!? I'm just a traveling merchant, and won't mind you inspecting my goods. I don't have any prohibited items on my wagon, there's no reason to stop me…」

「No matter what, you shall not pass. Turn back to the city, this is an order from the military.」

「T-Then, how long will this take? I can't let my clients wait too long…」

「We will inform you when the blockade will end at a later time.」

The soldier gave a non-answer. Talking to them from so far away made him anxious, and Horuhido pulled the reins to get closer. Kinjasha beside him shouted in a panic:

「Wait, Horuhido! Don't go any closer!」

Horuhido stopped when he heard this warning, and the soldiers before him all raised their wind guns at the same time. The two merchants turned pale as they stared down those barrels.

「This is my final warning. Turn back to the city— There won't be any more warning.」

The soldier declared sternly with no room for any negotiations. Horuhido realized a moment later than his senior— that he couldn't bargain with them.

At the same time— in the central military headquarters, a little to the south of the capital Banhataal. Because it was a place like this, a tense situation was taking place.

「… Please surrender, Sir Field Marshal.」

A military officer was cautiously holding up the newest model of Air Rifle that had been loaded up, and ready to fire at the pull of a trigger. He and 40 of his subordinates with the same equipment were all aiming their muzzle at one man.

「Let me ask you this instead. What authority do you have to give this order, Colonel Kualun?」

The question was asked in a very calm tone. In the middle of the corridor inside this military facility, the highest ranking officer in the military was surrounded by a large number of his subordinates armed with guns pointed at him. Even under such a situation, Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem didn't show any signs of wavering at all.

「The only ones who may issue orders to me, a Field Marshal, is His Majesty or the Chancellor acting in his stead. As far as I can tell, your orders have no legal standings.」

「It is as you suspected, I'm not acting under their authority. Regrettably, we are just threatening by force, Field Marshal Sir.」

The middle aged officer facing the Field Marshal boldly admitted that he was violating the laws. He endured the silent intimidation from the person before him and continued:

「But even so, we still have an hierarchy. We are following the orders of General Terushinha Remeon, and rebelling against you. Our fellow patriots worried about the future of the Empire are working with us too.」

「So you can’t explain yourself?」

Field Marshal Igsem tossed the documents in his hands onto the floor, and reached for the dual blades at his waist. When he saw that action, Colonel Kualun yelled:

「Please stop! It’s impossible for someone like you to not understand the situation!」

「What situation?」

「Even with your amazing swordsmanship, you can’t cut a path out of this encirclement! We have sent an entire platoon to deal with you directly, with more than one company of soldiers to support this mission!」

Colonel Kualun gestured at his men with his eyes, and continue to shout:

「Both ends of this corridor are barricaded with two rows of riflemen! Even if you break through me and the first rank of men, you will just be shot by the second row! The results will be the same if you try to escape by any other way! Do you think you can survive being hit by tens of lead bullets?」

Colonel Kualun shouted at the top of his lungs. Even with this overwhelming advantage, he didn’t look as if he was at ease. Because he knew— that his opponent was the strongest living thing on earth.

「This is my final warning, Field Marshal Sir. Please lay down your weapons and surrender! Or we will fire!」



Field Marshal Igsem fell silent with his hands slightly above his hilts. Silence overwhelmed this scene. The soldiers tightened their grip on their rifles— and for a brief instance, the cries of their comrades and the stamping of hooves reached their ears.

「……!」

Colonel Kualun's face turned tense. His unit that had surrounded the building was being attacked— he thought of that and didn't waver. This was the corridor on the second floor, even if the enemy forces break through and rushed to the Field Marshal— he would still have some buffer time in this worst scenario. He just had to subdue the target within this time.

「… I will give you five seconds, please lay down your arms, Field Marshal Sir! Five, four—」

Colonel Kualun started counting down, but before he could finish, the sound of hooves grew louder from behind him. It was too close to be from outside. A soldier in the back row looked back, and saw something incredible before him.

「—Oh! His here ahhh!」

Cavalry units were charging over from inside the building. An old soldier was leading the way with a fearsome smile, his red hair tied up in a ponytail flailing behind him. Most prominent of all, he was missing a left arm from the shoulder.

「Back row, engage!」

Colonel Kualun didn't make the foolish mistake of turning to his back and gave the order immediately, a praiseworthy split decision. However— while Kualan was speaking for less than two seconds, Field Marshal Igsem drew his blades at this moment that couldn't even be called an opening.

「Shoot!」

Before the gunners could pull their triggers, he took a quick step forth that was even faster than the wind. In that instant, Colonel Kualun lost both arms below the elbow.

「– Ah—」

He gave the order without delay, and his subordinates weren't slow to react. No one was to blame as Colonel Kualun and his men did their best.

But unluckily for them, their opponent was an Igsem— that was all.

Death came violently, heads, limbs and the barrels of rifles flew into the air. Seeing the flash of the dual blades meant death was imminent. There was no chance of resistance or flight as the bodies started piling up. The slashing saber cut off heads and the short sword stabbed into hearts— with the fiery haired Field Marshal as the epicenter, death spread outwards like a endless wave.

「Charge on out this way, Solvenares!」

The old soldier leapt over the hellish swordsman with his horse, leading his subordinates behind him down the other end of the corridor— where a row of enemy gunners were deployed and lie in wait.

「They are charging us…?」 「Tch! Don't look down on us!」

Unlike the surprise attack earlier, this was obviously a reckless charge. The gunners were ready to engage and aimed at the enemy coming straight at them foolishly.

「Fire!」

The explosion of compressed air reverberated in the corridor, and the horse of the old soldier leading the charge became their prime target. The horse was hit by the lead bullets and keeled over weakly.

「Hyaa!」

At that moment, the fiery haired old timer jumped off his saddle, and his body flew through the air in an arc. The gunners watched this

scene dumbfoundedly as the old man landed nimbly with barely any sound— and drew his saber swiftly with his lone arm.

「We want to kill us with these toys? Don't make me laugh, brats!」

With this feral smile as a signal, the second gruesome scene began. While the gunners were compressing the air in their rifles in preparation for the next volley, the old soldier took five lives with his blade.

With each flash of steel, a part of a soldier who got cut splattered bloodily. Not permitting any enemy within the reach of his blade to survive— even though he wield only one sword, there was no doubt that his blade was that of an Igsem.

「Hiee… Ahh...!」 「Ugh… Wahhh!」

Only now did Colonel Kualun's men started to scream. This terrible scene in the corridor was beyond their imagination and filled them with despair. They realized the battle couldn't be salvage— and none of them would survive.

Their ominous feeling was right on the mark. The calvary behind the old man charged into the crumbling defensive formation and ravaged them completely. With the momentum on their side, it didn't take long for the cavalry to wipe out all resistance.

「Hmmp, what a let down!」

After the killing stops, the one armed old man stood tall in the floor that had been stained red. Field Marshal Igsem sheathed his blades and saluted quietly:

「Thank you for your timely assistance, Honorary General Yorunzaf Igsem.」

「Don't address your elder with a rank lower than yours…! Now isn't the time to pick on this, what's going on here! You haven't

visited for a long time, and when I came over, this nostalgic base is in a mess!」

After being asked crudely by the old man, Field Marshal Igsem looked at the body of the officer by his feet:

「Judging by what Colonel Kualun said and the situation here, this is probably a coup initiated by General Remeon.」

「That brat Terushinha? Hey, when did things got so bad between you two? I thought you two from the third generation are really close?」

The one armed old man— Honorary General Yorunzaf Igsem grumbled with a frown. As he was talking to the Field Marshal, he deftly mustered his men. The unit quickly formed up in the cramped corridor.

「Never mind, we have to act now. Since Remeon is going all out with this coup, it will just be a matter of time before they seize this base. We have to take as many men as we can with us and flee, and strike back at another time.」

「I feel the same. Right now, the forces under the Honorary General…」

「You should know that a retired officer will have just one company of cavalry at the most. And hey, it's about time you address me as uncle.」

「Understood. We will use our mobility and try to link up with our allies that are resisting the coup.」

Field Marshal Igsem turned and left after saying that. He was cold and distance as usual— the one armed old man grumbled as he followed after him.

In the palace erected in the middle of the capital Banhataal. A jade eyed general leading a large group of soldiers walked down the stone paved path leading into the restricted area.

「Halt, halt!」 「How dare you barge in here without any prior arrangement!!」 「You sully His Majesty's restricted courtyard with your soldiers feet, know your place…!」

General Terushinha Remeon pushed aside the servants stopping him and hastened his pace. His eyes were set on the highest floor of the restricted building— the Emperor's chambers.

「Ara, what's the matter, General Remeon? Why the glum face?」

An extremely fat man in loose robes butted in with a friendliness that didn't fit the situation— he was one of the Empire's grand nobles, Count Hanbai Sanzari, serving as chief chamberlain under the Chancellor Trisnai, and frequently visit the restricted building.

「Don't be so hasty, if you have something to report to His Majesty, you can go through me as usual. Haven't we known each other for so many years, fuhuhu…」

General Remeon looked coldly at the Count who was leaning in with a disgusting smile:

「Count Sanzari…」

It was as he said, the two of them had been acquainted for a long time. That was why he knew that this person wouldn't even relay a message without taking any bribes. How long has he greased his hands with money— as he thought bitterly about all the time he wasted on him, the jade eyed general said:

「… I have always wanted to tell you one thing.」

「Oh, and what might that be?」

「The content of the report won't be twisted, no additional money is needed and won't mind the distance it travels— based on the above, a message pigeon is far better than you.」

The harsh criticism made the Count cramp his face. But before he could complain, the gunners around him raised their wind guns one by one.

「Huh… Ah…?」

Instead of being surprised, he was standing still in confusion. He was so unsightly that it made General Remeon dumbstruck— in his eyes, soldiers were just wallets and trash bins. He probably didn't feel any remorse as he exploited the soldiers as he wished as easily as he breaths. So the Count probably didn't even realized that others held a grudge against him. Up until his very last moments.

「No, stop jok—」 「Fire.」

There was nothing more to say. With that curt order, the sound of air exploding echoed out. The lead bullet from four barrels hit his head and two spots on his chest, killing the count instantly.

The obses body collapsed, and the blood gushing out of the corpse stained the white and carpet-like stone pavement that symbolized the sacredness of this place— at this moment, the servants who finally understood the situation sang a chorus of screams.

「Let's go.」

Without even the sentiments of squashing an ant, the jade eyes general ordered his men to march forth. His eyes glared at the servants scrambling away as he muttered determinedly:

「For the future of the Empire, we can't leave any scums alive— Kill them all.」

「Y-You insolent fools, where do you think—」 「Wait, what do you want? If it's money—」 「Stop, don't shoot, don't shoot ahh!」

Screams came from everywhere in the palace, most of them begging for their lives, death throes, or both.

Soldiers from the Remeon faction that infiltrated the palace moved efficiently. As if they were squashing bugs in a farm, they barely spoke as they massacred all the nobles within their field of vision.

「Please spare me, spare me…!」

「Ah, I'm out of bullets.」 「Pay more attention. Here, take this.」

A soldier nonchalantly loaded his gun in front of a noble prostrating and begging for mercy. He then points the muzzle to the back of the noble's head and squeezed the trigger.

Another soldier felt it was a waste of munition just before he fired, and kicked his target out of the fourth floor window instead.

They didn't lose their head from all the killings, and were extremely calm. Reaping the lives of the aristocrats didn't bring any guilt or excitement to them, which was a first for the soldiers. Instead, they felt a sense of disgust and obligation. All of them just wanted 「this laughable spring cleaning will end quickly」.

On the fourth floor, northern wing of the restricted building. After briskly climbing up three flights of stairs that were all placed in different parts of the floor, General Remeon finally reached the door leading into the Emperor's chambers. He took several deep breaths and said:

「… Your Majesty, pardon my intrusion.」

He pushed the door with one hand, but felt the resistance of a secured lock. The general gestured to his men with his eyes, and they raised their guns and fired at the hinge on the door. After the sharp cling of metal on metal, the hinge was shattered, rendering the lock useless.

On the other side of the fallen door was an incredibly luxurious bedroom. Although the room was adorned with many lush furniture, their master was missing. The vacant bed of the Emperor stared back at them. When he saw the emptiness of this place, General Remeon's face turned agitated.

「… Search quickly! He must be hiding somewhere!」

He ordered in frustration, and wasn't referring to the Emperor who couldn't even muster the strength to get out of his own bed. For General Remeon, the Emperor was someone he had to rescue from

the corrupted nobles. This bloody cleansing was for the sake of removing the target he had prioritized.

「Come out here, Trisnai Izanma! Resistance is futile! There is no place in this country for you to take refuge…!」

The General roared with all his bloodlust. The name of his sworn enemy echoed in the vast chambers—

At the foot of the Hiored Ore Mines shrouded in darkness, the imperial forces that had encircled the enemy forces holing up at the top of the mountain had the overwhelming advantage over their foes. And now, they were preparing throughout the night to retreat.

「Form up into groups! We don't have the luxury of sleeping tonight, time is of the essence!」

Major General Kubalha Saba instructed in an energetic tone completely that was different from yesterday. The bustling soldiers were very eager and passionate, making the warm night of the former eastern territories even hotter than usual.

This time, the forces mobilized to seize the ore mines were more than 10,000 strong. However, following the coup staged by the Remeon faction, 2,000 soldiers from the Igsem faction had been recalled back to the Empire.

And now, the remaining 8,000 troops would follow. This was a third faction not affiliated to either the Igsem or the Remeon. Heeding the call of Ikuta Sankrei, they revived the legends of all, and became members of the 「Rising Sun Regiment」.

「… So you want me to follow you?」

But even so, not everyone was on the same page. After all, most of the troops only knew about the truth after the dust had settled. Sergeant Major Suya Mittokarifu was one of them. Right now, she was staring coldly at her superior who was younger than her:

「Yes, I hope you can join us.」

Because of the practical reasons, the officers were given priority, and the explanation to them were given later. He felt guilty about this, but Ikuta still seeked the help of his deputy who had accompanied him since his commission. Not as her superior, but as a personal request.

「The Fourth Illumination company is my irreplaceable treasure. A unit that understands the way I think and can execute my intents smoothly can't be nurtured in a short period of time.」

「……」

「And as my deputy, Suya, you are even more special. You are already capable of taking over command in my stead in the forefront without letting the troops fall into confusion. You can run the company I rely on the most without any drop in its combat potential—」

「Too sloppy. It sounds like you have just been thinking of yourself.」

Suya retorted coldly, and Ikuta fell silent with an awkward smile. His dry expression irked her even more, and she raised her voice emotionally:

「What's the use of staying quiet now!? If you want to drag us in, then convince us with proper logic! Like saying our country is facing a serious crisis, or this is the obligation of a soldier…!」

In response to the pointed argument from Suya, Ikuta shook his head with the awkward smile still on his face:

「It's true that this is a national crisis, but it will be fine if we leave it like this. Because things didn't start going downhill now. From a long time ago, the Empire had been in a steady decline.」

「……!」

「As for the obligation of a soldier, that is a difficult question. Protecting the lives and properties of the citizens and uphold the

peace— Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon are both agreeable to this. Their loyalty to the Empire runs so deep, that it will be foolish to compare myself to them. But a coup was still staged, which is a pain.」

The youth said with a sigh, and shrugged in self mockery:

「For the clash between those two, I don't have the guts to throw my name into the ring as a patriot, that's too out of place for me. Leaving the national issue aside, I have a more personal reason to interfere with this coup.」

「… And that is?」

「I don't want to lose Yatori.」

Ikuta answered without any pause. When she heard him say that name without any hesitation, Suya felt a flash of pain deep in her chest.

「In this war, she will be asked to play the role of an Igsem more strictly than before. If she crosses the line, she won't be able to revert to her old lifestyle, no matter what the result of the coup might be— do you understand?」

Suya was dumbstruck when she was asked that. She had witnessed it herself during the unrest in the northern territories. The fiery weight on her shoulders that had accumulated over the years. It was a heavy load that the descendent of an Igsem had to bear—

「That's why I want to end the fight before things got that far. So she can kill less of our comrades, and we can squabble and laugh like old times when we meet again… I need your help to do this. Please help me, Suya.」

After saying that, Ikuta stopped trying to convince her. He didn't mince his words or use grand ideology as excuses, and just shared what he really thinks. He left it up to the other party to decide if they want to spit or trample over it. This was the dark haired youth's way of showing his sincerity.

A silence as vicious as molten lead fell on them. Suya glared at the youth with furious eyes, and made her decision— if he averts his gaze, she would chew on his throat.

The murderous rage in her chest was stronger than that time when she learned about Ikuta's relationship with her mother. It was his fault for going overboard and shamelessly bringing up Yatorishino Igsem's name, and use that as the reason for the woman before her— Suya Mittokarifu to put her life on the line. If that boy didn't realized the crime he just committed, and only cowered in fear of retribution then he should just burn in hell.

But the infuriating thing was, the youth didn't avert his eyes. He didn't evade the admonishment directed at him, and endured that torture— so he knew it very clearly, and still decided to stand before her. The tense silence meant he had the will to not use sophistry to push the responsibility away.

Suya understood that he was waiting for judgement to be passed on him for saying all this.

「…… Sigh～」

She relaxed her tightly pursed lips, and the emotions that were about to burst out were ejected out with a sigh of resignation— this was probably the deepest sigh of her life.

「… You only care about your own convenience. What happened to the national crisis?」

「If I didn't pay attention, I might forget about that.」

「Yes, yes, I knew it. Ah~ really now! I really~ really~ can't leave you alone! That means I have to remember in your stead!」

Suya groaned and stamp her feet.

「Don't misunderstand! I'm just worried about leaving this to you, and reluctantly helping you! I also hope First Lieutenant Yatorishino will come back to us too!」

She was desperately putting up a front. The dark haired youth nodded and smiled:

「Thank you, Suya. I'm really glad that you are my deputy.」

「Thank me after the entire thing is settled! There is no time, so what should I do?」

After receiving her orders, Suya turned to hide her tearing eyes and ran away from her superior officer. Ikuta watched her go, and walked to Princess Chamille who was watching from some distance away.

「… You will get stabbed one day.」

「What are you saying all of a sudden?」

The Princess didn't speak any further and just stayed by the youth's side. Ikuta turned towards the entrance of the large tent to avoid the implication behind her silence:

「I hope things are going smoothly for everyone. Depending on the personalities of the officers and the sergeants under their charge, it wouldn't be a surprise if we have a large number of detractors. It will be too naive to think everyone will be as supportive as Suya.」

「… That's right, but I'm not too worried. The number is small for the past unit too. The trust you have built with them through live battle is very significant to them too.」

「I hope so too. After losing the backing of an official order from the top, we only have the trust of the soldiers left. If that trust isn't strong enough, we can't complain if they shoot us in the back—」

He was the one who said that, but still Ikuta felt a chill behind him— at this moment, a middle aged officer walked over in large strides, as if he was breaking up the heavy atmosphere between the two of them.

「Regiment Commander, I have several matters to consult with you!」

Major General Saba stopped his supervision of the troops for a moment and shouted at Ikuta. His loud and lively voice was completely different from how he was earlier.

「Please tell me.」 The youth answered with a nod, and the Major General spoke again:

「First is the Third Princess' escort team. They are clamoring for the Princess, what should we do?」

「I can empathize with them, but we can't accede to their demand. As royal escorts, they are all from the Igsem faction, and will never agree with our actions. Continue to keep them away from the Princess.」

「That's a bit too lenient.」

「I'm doing this with the future in mind. If we kill them in the heat of the moment, that means we have forsaken the possibility of negotiating with the Igsem faction. Treating them respectfully is the best way.」

「Even if we do, I don't think Field Marshal Igsem will be more accepting of our actions. Let me confirm again, is this really fine? Keeping them safe might give an edge to the enemy forces instead—」

The Major General's words were cut short. Ikuta's palm was raised to the nose of the Major General who was a full head taller than him.

「……Major General, mind your words. Aside from the Kioka army in the ore mines, we don't have any other 『enemies』 at this point. Our goal is to mediate the end of the coup peacefully, not overthrow the establishment or usurp control of the military. We don't have enemies we have to defeat in the Empire.」

The youth said in a firm tone. When he heard that, Major General Saba nodded in agreement:

「Pardon me, Regiment Commander. I will be careful next time.」

Ikuta shrugged at this interaction that had deep significance… he couldn't complain about being tested, given the position he was in.

The reality was, with the military might of the 「Rising Sun Regiment」 and the authority of the Third Princess, he had a good chance of usurping the country. They only had a verbal guarantee that Ikuta would not act on such short sighted ambitions. And even if that was true now, no one could be certain whether that would change in the future.

Where would Ikuta Sankrei's ambition take him? Major General Saba had the obligation to see this to the end— and the dark haired youth had the responsibility to answer this expectation. That was the weight of the position he had obtained through the fame of Bada Sankrei.

「Right now, we have to assign some of our men to be the Princess' escorts.」

「Understood, that will be safer. As for the next issue—」

「First Lieutenant Solork! Is First Lieutenant Solork here～～!?」

Just as Major General Saba was about to change topics, someone shouted outside the tent. What was going on? The officers around them furrowed their brows as the sound of an argument came from the outside:

「What are you doing!? I already told you, only First Lieutenants and above may enter!」

「Please make an exception for me to go in!」

「Ridiculous… Get out of here! You want us to lock you up!?」

that won't do! If I'm imprisoned, I won't be able to protect the Princess!」

The familiar female voice made Ikuta and Princess Chamille looked at each other baffledly. After leaving the Princess to the guards

inside, the youth stopped the conversation and headed outside, and saw the parties arguing there.

「…Warrant Officer Lucanti?」

When he saw the woman in light armour, Ikuta called out puzzledly. She was on the verge of trading blows with an old officer there, but her face lit up at the sight of the youth.

「Ohh, it's First Lieutenant Solork! That's great, I wanted to see you!」

「No, rather than that, why are you still here? Didn't you go back to the Empire with Yatori?」

The confused youth tilted his head. Just as his actions suggested, the Hargunska house was a traditional family that emphasized the chivalry of knights. Lucanti also admired Yatori, so Ikuta thought she would follow Yatori and join the Igsem faction for this coup.

「Yes! I was planning to do so, but First Lieutenant Yatorishino gave me a suggestion. After considering it, I decided to stay here.」

「Yatori? What did she tell you?」

「『Rather than following me, can you protect the Third Princess in my stead?』. Since that was the request of First Lieutenant Yatorishino, I couldn't turn this down. Protecting the royal family who are the base rock of the empire is the utmost honour for a knight!」

Warrant Officer Lucanti puffed out her chest proudly. As if she just remembered something, she handed a document clamped under her arm to him.

「This is the letter of recommendation! For your perusal.」

Ikuta used Kusu's Lantern light to scan the paper. It was Yatori's handwriting, and the content outlined the reason she recommended Warrant Officer Lucanti to be the Princess' escort. She left the decision and specifics to Ikuta.

After reading the content, the youth returned his gaze back to her, enlightened.

「I understand. You wish to stay here and protect the Princess, correct?」

「That's right! I wish to devote myself to the safety of Her Highness!」

「Yes, thank you… anyway, can you get your men ready first? We are reorganizing the regiment for withdrawal right now, and will let you know your platoon's assigned post when we are ready.」

「Yes Sir! I will leave the details to you!」

After saluting energetically, Warrant Officer Lucanti turned and left immediately. Ikuta watched her go with a awkward smile, then returned to the tent. Major General Saba and Princess Chamille were waiting for him with a surprised faces.

「Hmm～ I'm not good with dealing with that girl… she and her brother are too endearing for me.」

「What's going on, Solork? Is Warrant Officer Lucanti going to serve me?」

「That's right, consider it a parting gift from Yatori. She even wrote a recommendation letter.」

As she read the document Ikuta handed her, the Princess' hands trembled.

「This means… she wants to fill the vacancy after her departure…?」

「That's part of the reason, but she was probably just worried about Warrant Officer Lucanti. If she participates as a member of the Igsem faction against this coup, she would have to fight her comrades. Her former allies would become her enemies. The Warrant Officer is as emotional as her brother, and won't be able to take it— putting it more harshly, she will be useless.」

「……」

「To prevent her junior from being forced into a corner, Yatori intentionally left her behind. She judged that 『protecting the Princess』 was the best position for Warrant Officer Lucanti, and our camp can do that for her.」

Princess Chamille stared at the recommendation letter and bit her lips quietly. Ikuta noted her reaction and then turned to Major General Saba:

「Sorry about the interruption. What's the second point?」

「—Yes, its regarding the Kioka army before us. Are we giving up on retaking the ore mines?」

「That's correct. We can't afford to fight on two fronts. Let's not dwell on this and withdraw the whole regiment.」

「Our entire force, huh… if we withdraw despite our overwhelming advantage, they will suspect that the Empire has an internal issue. When we give up on the siege, they will despatch a messenger immediately back to inform their headquarters. Will that be fine?」

「I will prefer to stop them if we could, but that will mean leaving a few thousand troops behind. However, I won't agree to splitting our forces here. After all, we will be interjecting ourselves between the Igsem and Remeon as a third faction.」

Furthermore— the corners of Ikuta's lips stiffened as he continued:

「Even if we leave a detachment behind, I don't see that white pretty boy giving up on contacting the Kioka headquarters. He will find a way to break through the encirclement and send the Intel. I can't even be sure if we can buy any more time with that.」

「… Ugh.」

「It's better to assume from the get go that this will be a race against time. The white pretty boy will inform Kioka that the Imperial

Army had withdrew, and they will confirm that a coup had happened. Their National Assembly will declare war, and mobilize an emergency punitive force to attack us— the white pretty boy might receive Intel from a spy within the Empire via other means too. Considering all that, and with a more conservative calculation, let's say we have two months.」
<TL: 国民議会 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Assembly>

His head hurts after hearing this number, but Ikuta continued determinedly:

「So we have resolve this coup and get the military to unite within two months. It's a tall order, but not impossible. If Kioka attacks us while our military is fragmented, the Empire will fall— both Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon should understand that is the worst outcome.」

Ikuta said all that in a hurry, as if he was trying to convince himself— the youth felt a voice mocking himself from his heart. As he took deep breaths to shake away these thoughts, Major General Saba's right hand smacked his back hard.

「Uwah—?」

「Don't push yourself, boy! You won't be fighting alone, we will all face this together!」

The Major General had a firm smile on his face, which mesmerized the coughing Ikuta— that bright and trustworthy smile made him realized the strength of the man who used to serve under his father with the nickname of 「Twin Jewels of the Sun」.

「Cough cough…! Yes, that will be a big help. But be more gentle with your patting next time.」

The youth groaned with tears in his eyes. Major General Saba laughed at his reaction for a moment, then returned to the topic:

「So for the third issue— the navy in Port Nibong. What should be do about them?」

「I just sent a messenger to report what has transpired to the navy, so we can leave them alone for now. At this time, it's difficult to draw them to our cause, since they are very adamant on staying politically neutral. Unlike you and the others, Major General, they don't have close ties with the 『Rising Sun Regiment』. If we want to convince the lady boss of that pirate navy— correction, Admiral Erynphin Jurgus, will require extensive preparation.」

「Yes, I wholeheartedly agree. Even after receiving our report, they will choose to stay neutral for the coup. Field Marshal Igsem probably won't insist on recalling them. If we withdraw the navy, we will lose our check against Kioka. Even if they cooperate, the navy is still useless on land.」

「That's right. I feel bad about going back right after reaching here, let's leave the navy here as a blockade. If Kioka tried to use this chance to invade us, their first objective would be retaking Port Nibong. The navy understands that too, and will definitely perform their duty.」

「Understood. The fourth issue is the retreat route. We will want to take the shortest route here.」

「Correct. I hope to return by the way we came here.」

「That will be the best way. But given the situation, it will be too naive to hope that the Remeon faction won't hinder our retreat path. We have captured several strongholds during our march here, especially this place—」

Major General Saba laid out a map and pointed at one spot.

「— this fort on Kudra mountain pass, which is difficult to bypass on our way back. If we want to avoid this place, then we will have to take a three day detour along the coast. This mountain pass is the

perfect terrain to stop an army, and the Remeon faction will likely fortify this place.」

「Hmm.」

「It might be possible for us force our way through, but it will deplete our forces and waste a lot of time. In my personal opinion, taking the detour is the better option— what do you think, Regiment Commander?」

When Major General asked that, Ikuta groaned with a「Hmm～」. He stared at the map with a hand on his chin:

「I remember this place, hmm… hmm~ugh~ it's at the tip of my tongue...」

He nursed his temples with the fingers on both hands, and looked at the girl beside him for some reason:

「… Princess, what do you know about Kudra mountain pass?」

「Huh… me?」

The Princess was a little flustered as she didn't expect to be pulled into the conversation. But she searched through her memories and found the relevant information with her outstanding talent:

「… It's official name is Alisshi 61 mountain fort. That used to be an empire fortress, and was built in the early years of the 8th Imperial century, as part of the strategy to strengthen the defence of the eastern territories. The military structure architect Alisshi Hanzen was commissioned to construct this fort and many others. But the fort didn't have the chance to be put to use, and there had not been any records of direct battles involving it—」

Before the Princess could finish, the youth stroked her blonde hair gently with both hands.

「Yes, that's the one. Your Highness sure is amazing.」

「W-What…」

Leaving her standing stiffly behind, Ikuta turned to Major General Saba with a fearless expression:

「I just want to confirm, has there been any intense fighting at that fort during this campaign? Was it badly damaged?」

「No. We took the long way along the coast, that's where most of the fighting took place. After we bypass the fort, it lost its value as a defensive fortification for Kioka. It was deserted by them, and we retook it undamaged.」

The Major General was implying that the fort's defences wasn't compromised. However, his reaction ran contrary to his expectations.

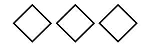
「Splendid— the plan is set then. We won't take a detour, and will go by the quickest route.」

「What—? You want to take the fort and deplete our forces?」

「That's not necessary either.」

Ikuta shook his head quietly, then declared to the puzzled Major General Saba and Princess Chamille:

「Yatori will take the fort in less than half a day.」



「—Fire!」

Twelve wind cannons shot out of the stone fort erected on the mountain pass. A barrage of iron balls rolled down the slope.

The soldiers that were approaching the enemy cautiously were forced to retreat.

「Good, chase them away. Gunners, keep your guards up!」

Above the cannons protruding out of the fort, there were countless barrels pointing out of arrow slits and the battlements, making the entire structure look like a giant porcupine. You shall not pass, no matter how many people you have— As if their strong will had taken physical form.

「… I don't know who their commander is, but the Igsem faction is taking this too lightly. It's foolish to force their way pass this fort with just 2,000 men.」

The 600 strong battalion was led by the Remeon faction officer, Captain Corsa Gazuriku, a veteran soldier who rose through the ranks and known for his tactical acumen in base defences. The high command thought highly of his quarter century of experience, and assigned him to keep the Igsem faction in check for this coup.

「Just stay there and don't move. Their tactical mistake is to our advantage… however, even though we are now on different sides, firing on our colleagues isn't a pleasant experience.」

The Captain scrowled his lips from the bitter taste in his mouth. He looked around him, and saw many of his comrades showing the same face.

「… As expected of a fort built by the Empire, it's impregnable.」

As she observed the enemy through her telescope, Igsem faction officer Major Nudakka Megu cracked a joke that she herself felt wasn't funny. She growled as she watched the troops running back from the cannon barrage:

「It is delusional to think we can take this fort quickly with our numbers and equipment. They have plenty of cannons and guns, and the stone fort is impervious to fire, there are no weak points. If we really want to take that fort, then we will have to borrow Blast cannons from Kioka.」

The Major grumbled in resignation. From the bird's eye view, the fort was concaved in the center. First was the wall blocking the road, and at the ends of this wall, another wall juts out perpendicularly, forming two more walls to the front, and two more to the back.

Each wall was fully garrisoned with soldiers, and any careless approach would face attacks from three sides. The bombardment

earlier was just a preview. The casualties would only start piling up when the pitiful soldiers march into the concave area of the fort.

「However, we have a way of taking this fort by today— isn't that right, First Lieutenant Yatorishino?」

「That's true.」

The vermillion haired girl answered as her superior fell into deep thoughts. After thinking over it for a long time, the Major turned suddenly to her with pursed lips:

「… Alright, give it a try. When the Field Marshal told me about that, to be honest, I still have my doubts… But after weighing the losses and chances of victory, it's difficult for us to forgo this possibility. We must hurry back to the Empire as soon as possible.」

After giving a well practiced salute, Yatori prepared to return to her subordinates. Realizing what her action meant, Major Megu called out to her frantically.

「Wait, First Lieutenant Yatorishino! Are you planning to be the frontline commander?」

「Yes, I am.」

「That's too reckless! You are second only to the Field Marshal in terms of being the symbol of the Igsem faction. In such a situation, you should exercise caution and stay in the backline! Don't worry, we will execute your proposal as planned—」

「Pardon my impudence, but it is during situation like this when a Igsem should lead from the front. Major, you must have noticed that the soldiers are wavering.」

Ughh, Major Megu was speechless. Yatori was right. Ever since they learned that the Remeon faction had staged a coup, the troops were very shaken. They were hesitant to fight their comrades, and afraid they might be on the side of the losers— the soldiers were confused and on edge.

「We have let them know now that they should follow the Igsem. In that case, the only way is for me to step up and show them personally.」

「… B-But your dual blades and vermillion hair are too prominent! You will be a prime target in this terrain…」

Major Megu alternate her gaze between the fort and Yatori as she voiced her worries. Yatori bundled up her long hair with a smile:

「I don't plan on committing suicide, Major. I will hide my hair with a cap, and let my comrades safekeep my blades. I will arm myself with a crossbow and short spear. From far, I would look no different from the other soldiers— However, the men will be able to identify me from behind.」

As she was answering, Yatori had quickly stuffed her red hair into a cap. With no reasons to stop her, Major Megu lowered her head solemnly.

「Well then, I'm going off.」

The vermillion haired girl took that silence as consent, and started moving again.

「Ugh…?」

Captain Gazuriku who was carefully observing the battle noticed the enemy's movement with his keen senses. A large group of soldiers had spread out in front of the fort, and that recklessness made the Captain frown:

「They didn't learn their lesson…? All cannons, fire!」

On that command, the twelve cannons protruding out of the fort shot out iron balls. The soldiers from the Igsem faction weren't fazed by the large number of iron balls rolling down the slope. They stood in the gaps between the lines of fire, and returned fire with their wind guns.

「Futile…! Gunners, return fire! Cannons, adjust your angle horizontally and continue to fire!」

The Captain retaliated with a strong attack. They were trading shots at a distance of 500m, but neither side were too concerned with accuracy. Most of the shots fell short as the gunners kept pulling their trigger.

「They want to make this a battle of attrition? Naive!」

He was certain of that. As the Kudra mountain pass was one of the intermediate base for supplies, they had plenty of ammunition and other resources. In a shootout, the Igsem faction's supply would run dry first. Confident of victory, Captain Gazuriku continued directing his men— however…

「…? That's…!」

Moments later, it was clear that the enemy wasn't going for a battle of attrition. Behind the soldiers that were spread out in front of the fort, a large group was charging in behind many wagons.

「「「Woahh!」」」

Leaving the safety of distance behind, the troops advanced on the fort.

The roar of the soldier sounded more like their resistance to fear instead of a display of their fighting spirit. The cannonballs rolling on the ground and countless bullets raining from the sky— either of these two could end their lives with a bad roll of the dice.

「Don't panic! Keep your head down and advance behind the wagon in three columns!」

In the group that was herding the eight wagons forward, Yatori was in the unit on the extreme right. The cargo ladened wagons performed their duties as shields against the bullets, providing safety for the soldiers— but that was just for bullets.

「Incoming! Brace yourself!」

There was a loud explosion of air. The cannon fire from the fort hit three of the eight wagons, sending splinters flying. A hole was torn through a wagon, and a large piece of cargo rolled out. Another got its wheel blown off and toppled over. The leg of the horse pushing the third wagon got fractured, and the soldiers started pushing the wagon instead.

「Don't falter! It doesn't matter how many wagons they destroy, we just need one to reach the fort…!」

The soldiers behind the wagons were all pushing hard right from the start, but the bullet proof material in the wagon slowed their advance, and they got hit by a second cannon volley. Another three wagons got hit, with two of them falling over— with 200m left to the fort, the numbers of wagons had been reduced by half.

「Neighh—!」 「Damn it, the horse…!」

With the wall right in front of them, Yatori's wagon ran into a problem. The horse had gone berserk after it got hit in the neck by shrapnels. The driver tried to calm it down, but the wounded beast was out of control.

「Sergeant, get off the wagon!」

Judging that this was the limits, Yatori dashed to the driver's seat, and cut the ropes tying the horse to the wagon with her spear. The freed horse fled ran away, and the wagon leaned back onto the soldiers. They groaned in pain as their boots sinked into the ground.

「Just a bit more! Everyone, push with everything you got!」

Yatori shouted, as she and the Sergeant who was driving joined in. The entire unit pushed the wagon with all their might. As they drew near the fort, the rain of bullet grew in intensity.

「「「「Woooahhh!」」」」

The explosion of the wind cannon rang out from the fort right before them. The soldiers who heard that felt that death was breathing right down their necks— only when the impact of the

wagon hitting the wall made them realized that the cannon fire missed them by inches earlier.

「We have reached! Quickly, hide on the right of the wagon!」

The soldiers snapped back when they heard the orders, quickly secured the wheels and charged into the safe zone they just created. They were at the tip of the right wall that was jutting out perpendicularly.

「Huff, huff…!」 「W-We are here…!」

Everyone let out a sigh of relief. The top of the wall was jutting out to prevent the enemy from scaling it, and in this case, it became a shield to protect Yatori's group. The wagon they pushed all the way covered their left, stopping all attacks from the fort. The cannons couldn't hit them either, as the angle was too steep.

「Reaching here means we have won— Everyone take three deep breaths, remember to hold it in.」

Yatori inhaled and exhaled together with her subordinates, and after everyone regained their composure, she issued her next orders:

「We will carry out the plan here. Take out the hammer!」

Three soldiers took out the hammers strapped to their backs, and faced the fort's wall:

「Divide this area into three, then knock on every spot of the wall. Now!」

On her instructions, the three hammers started knocking on the solid walls. But the wall remained unmoved despite the soldier's mighty swing. Their hands were starting to ache from the recoil instead. But they didn't complain and kept swinging their tools in silence.

「… If the fort sent out their infantry, we will be taken out easily.」

The sergeant watching them work muttered quietly. Yatori shook her head when she heard that:

「They would need to open the gate to send their troops out. They want to stall us here, but I don't think they will take such a big risk at this point in time. If something really happens Major Megu will send reinforcements immediately.」

「I see— No, pardon my impudence. I'm not afraid, and thinks this is a pretty good place to die. I have decided to fight under you to my last breath.」

The soldiers around them concurred with the sergeant with a faint smile. Everyone here has made their resolve— Yatori received this strong message from them and smiled gratefully.

「… Thank you. Alright then, I will order everyone here again— You must survive!」

「「「「Mdm, yes Mdm!」」」」

The group answered in unison. At that moment one of the soldier felt something strange when his hammer hit the wall. Could it be… he looked closely at the spot he hit— and saw the rectangular bricks had sunk into the wall.

「First Lieutenant, bingo! We found it!」

The soldier shouted with joy. With the second and third strike, the bricks sunk in even more. Soon, the bricks were knocked into the cavity inside. The other side of the wall was hollow, and really dark.

「Well done! The nine men responsible for the work inside, take your partner out!」

The nine soldiers who were watching from behind swapped places with the hammer team. All of them were carefully holding the partner Sprite they had taken out from their pouch.

「I'm counting on you, Hymn……」「Lou, it's in your hands now.」「Maka, I believe in you, do your best.」

After sharing a quiet word, the soldiers sent their partners through the wall into the darkness. The tiny bodies of the Sprite with leather bags on their backs marched fearlessly into the darkness.

At the same time, Captain Gazuriku who was on top of the defensive wall couldn't understand what his opponent's intentions were.

They stopped most of the wagons charge with cannon fire, and only one wagon reached the wall. That was a great result, but he couldn't shake off the feeling that something was wrong— Why did they send out those wagons?

「What are they trying to do by sending those wagons to the fort…? They're too short as siege ladders. No, if they want to attack, they should send a siege tower instead. Something so simple should be clear with a glance…」

The Captain looked down at the only wagon team that made it pass the bombardment and frowned— this was too sloppy for a suicide squad. What kind of damage could merely twenty men inflict? The best they could manage were to stick to the wall and suffocate themselves.

「Has their commander lost his marbles—」

At the same time, the Sprites that had infiltrated the wall were marching through a dark tunnel under the feet of the baffled Captain. The Luminous Sprite Hymn led the way with its Lantern light, with his other companions following behind. The tunnel sloped downwards gently, and went right under the fort.

After walking for about ten minutes, the range of the Lantern light unveiled a large space. They exited the cramped tunnel and went into this vast area. Hymn switched its Lantern light to a Search light, and scanned the place. It found a beam that spreads horizontally in all directions.

Once they knew they were at the right place, the nine Sprites split into three groups, each consisting of a Luminous, Fire and Wind Sprite. They found the base of the beam, then took out the rags soaked in oil from their backpack, and wrapped it loosely around the bases. The Fire Sprite then set it aflame with their Fire hole, and the Wind Sprite blew in air from their Wind Tunnel to make the fire stronger. The intense flame then spread to the beam and engulfed it—

Almost one hour after Yatori's team started their work, a soldier in the fort noticed that something was amiss. When he went to the lower levels to replenish ammo, he could see smoke and a strong burning smell from the room.

「F-Fire! The room below is on fire—!」

This report also reached Captain Gazuriku who was directing the defences on the wall. His face turned stiff when he heard the news, but he still sent soldiers to put out the fire. However, there were more surprises to come.

「Hey, where's the fire? How did it start!?」

As there had not been any reports on the progress on the fire, the Captain asked one of his men who had returned from the lower levels.

「W-We can't find it…! The smoke is the thickest in the ammo cache, but there isn't any fire there…!」

The Captain's face turned pale from confusion when he heard that:

「Stop kidding me, the ammo cache is in the lowest level of the fort! If the fire didn't start from there, then where did the smoke come from!? Comb the area again—」

Before he could order another thorough search, the Captain lost his balance. He managed to steady himself, but an icy chill ran down his spine.

「… Hey, what was that…?」

Captain Gazuriku asked bewilderedly. His subordinate answered with a twitching face:

「C-Captain… the floor over there…!」

The soldier pointed at the Captain's feet with a trembling finger, where the stone floor was sinking through the gaps. It wasn't just that spot, the floor around the Captain were tilting as the battlement fell apart—

「W-What's going on… Uwahh?」

That was all the time he had to ask his question. A noise ten times louder than the growling from before rang out, and after a violent quaking, the floor started collapsing. The Captain and the others started to fall from a lethal height, as if they were swallowed by the ground.

「… It's here! Push the wagon and retreat!」

Yatori sensed the tremor from her back that was leaning against the wall, and ordered her team to withdraw. The group and the Sprites that had returned after finishing their tasks quickly pulled away from the fort.

Immediately after that, the sabotage of the fort reached its climax. The result was spectacular. The fort on the Kudra mountain pass known for its sturdiness started breaking apart before them.

The screams of the Remeon faction soldiers were accentuated by the fort collapsing like toy blocks. To them, this was an unexpected and senseless destruction.

「A-Amazing…」 「What the hell—」 「That fort fell so easily…」

Leaving her stunned subordinates behind, Yatori looked at the opposite direction of the fort— and her allies who were marching forth on Major Megu's orders. There was no stopping them now. The intense cannon and gun fire were silence with the collapse of the fort.

「The plan worked, let’s wait for our allies to come and link up with them.」

「… Yes Mdm! If we are going in, should I get the men ready for melee combat?」

「No, wait for Major Megu’s orders— it probably won’t be necessary. Since the fort is destroyed, it’s impossible for the fight to continue.」

Yatori answered calmly. But the melancholy in her voice wasn’t just her subordinates’ imagination.

「… Ugh…」

Captain Gazuriku woke up with dull pain all over his body.

「Corsa! Wake up, Corsa!」

His partner cried from his pouch. He heard the cries, but it still felt like he was dreaming. He touched his forehead that was burning up, and found his palm slicked with fresh blood. The stabbing pain and the reality of the situation then hit him.

「……!」

The Captain snapped back to reality, and when he couldn’t see anything aside from debris, he understood the gravity of the situation— he couldn’t believe it, but the fort had collapsed. He didn’t allow a single enemy to step inside, but the fort was broken so easily in the end.

「… I-Is… there anyone…!」

The Captain seemed to have bruised his ribs when he fell, and just raising his voice filled him with pain. But now wasn’t the time to care about his wounds. Since the fort had collapsed, the enemy will attack. He need to muster the troops—

At this moment, the Captain heard the sound of boots stepping on debris. One of his unharmed comrades was nearby— with that

thought in mind, the Captain shouted: 「Here! I'm over here!」 The footsteps grew closer.

But when he shouted for the third time, a strong sense of wrongness crawled up his back— since they could hear him, why weren't they responding?

「……!」

He groped instinctively with his hand, and his right fingers grabbed the stock of a wind gun that probably fell together with him. The Captain was grateful for this small blessing, and quickly installed his partner onto the gun.

「Who is it!」

He pointed his muzzle at the direction of the incoming presence, and shouted harshly. A moment later, a calm voice came from the other side of what used to be a solid wall:

「I'm Imperial Army First Lieutenant Yatorishino Igsem. Is that the commander of the fort's defences, Captain Corsa?」

The Captain twitched his lips. As if she had seen through him, Yatori continued:

「Please stop resisting, you are in no state to continue fighting. Our suppression of the fort is mostly complete, most of the soldiers have surrender. We have already moved on to clearing the debris and rescuing the wounded.」

「……」

「I repeat, your forces can't fight any longer. To avoid unnecessary loss of lives, please use your authority as the commander and make clear your unit's intent to surrender. We have already made the arrangements.」

The other party advised him to surrender with a formal tone, and Captain Gazuriku could feel that she was telling the truth. He could

hear several sets of approaching footsteps, and they would attack if he didn't surrender.

The Captain ground his teeth in despair— this was checkmate.

He wallowed in his own incompetence, but had to suppressed that feeling with the enemy right before him. He asked with his heart burning in shame:

「... Can you explain something before that? I have no idea what happened. Why did the fort collapse? Why did we lose?」

His voice was strained because of his broken ribs as Captain Gazuriku asked to start off the procedure of surrendering. The person on the other side noted his intent and said:

「—Captain, do you know the official name of this fort?」

「Official name...? No, I have always called this the Kudra mountain pass. I don't recall anyone referring to this place by any other name.」

「That is understandable. This fort had traded hands without any battle between Kioka and the Empire, and the origins of this fort had been forgotten by the people. To be frank, given how this fort was built, this isn't an ordinary fort.」

Her subordinates were standing by, ready to charge in. Yatori continued explaining through the wall.

「The official name is Alisshi 61 mountain fort. A fort built by the renown architect Alisshi Hanzen. He was famous for his part in the erection of over a hundred military structures, including this fort. During its construction, the Imperial army gave him a difficult condition.」

「Condition...?」

「『Impregnable in defence, and easy to subjugate when attacked』. This contradictory condition was made under the pretext that the fort might fall into the hands of the Kioka. A sturdy fort

would be a great threat when the enemy seizes it— and the land around here traded hands between the Kioka and the Empire frequently back then. This new fort had to be built with the ease of retaking it from the enemy in mind. If the fort was too strong, it will be easy to defend, but hard to take back. However, the enemy can easily destroy it if the defences are compromised. Strong defences and ease of attack— even with this contradictory conditions, Hanzen still researched and made use of his vast talents to seek an extraordinary solution. And for this fort, he used 『planned flawed construction』.」

「… Planned, flawed…」

「As the name implies, a flaw that can destroy the fort easily was intentionally built in. And of course, the fort was constructed sturdily, and people who didn't know about this flaw would just see it as another fort. Only a select few in high command knew about this flaw, so it could be utilized in the future— the Alisshi 61 mountain fort was erected with this flawed design.」

「… Where exactly is the weak point of this fort…?」

「First is the secret entrance at the edge of the wall. A cramp passage that Sprites could barely squeeze through leads to the base of the structure— a place propped up with wooden beams, the only part of this stone fort that was made with wood. Ventilation hole was intentionally built in, so you can imagine what will happen if that place is set on fire.」

The Captain groaned after learning the truth— no wonder they couldn't find the source of the fire, it originated from deeper underground, and the foundation of the building was the thing that was burning. That also meant that he had already lost at that moment.

「… Who form the Igsem faction proposed this plan?」

「Of the soldiers present, only Major Nudakka Megu and I knew about this plan. As for who uncovered this information… it’s me and another man who isn’t here right now.」

Yatori answered immediately. When he heard that, the Captain frowned and glared at his opponent behind the wall:

「… It’s hard for me to believe that. From what I know, there shouldn’t be any officer who knew about the flawed construction.」

「This must be a top secret that very few officers knew, without any written records to avoid the information from being spread. It was forgotten with the passage of time, and almost no one in high command knew about it.」

「I thought as much… Then how did you and that man learned this?」

「… It was by accident. I read several of Alisshi Hanzen works back in the Imperial High School, such as the critically acclaimed 《Battlefield Construction Theory》, 《Terrain and Stronghold》. However, the 《Foundation of Forts》 he penned in his later years, which is often overlooked, had an alarming secret. The entire book was a code. If the wordings are rearranged in a specific pattern, then the plans and weakness of several forts that Hanzen designed in the past will be unveiled.」

「What—」

「That would be going too far as a joke. If this was discovered while he was still alive, he will be executed for leaking military secrets. We can only guess his motivation behind this… Hanzen was a man who actively seeks fame and status, and was said to be jealous of his students who outshined him in his later years. He was lauded as a genius in the past, but he was slowly fading into obscurity— he probably did something so reckless because he couldn’t accept this reality. He wants to leave his mark in history, no matter what it took.」

Bitter emotions spread in Yatori's chest— he never thought she would fulfill the late architect's last wishes. It might be fine if that was done against the enemy nation, but this was a fight with fellow imperial soldiers, so it made its mark in the worst way possible.

「… That was how this entire matter came about, can you accept this?」

She asked after finishing her explanation. Several seconds later, Captain Gazuriku smiled wryly:

「… Simply put, I was caught up in the last hoorah of that senile architect a few centuries after his death? What a joke… That's too much for me to accept.」

「……」

「Even if I forced myself to accept that… the fact that this flaw was uncovered in a library is infuriating. I didn't have that privilege when I was your age, and the only education I got was the harsh training of an infantryman. But even so, not starving was a blessing for a son of an impoverished farmer like me…」

「… I know. You accomplished outstanding performance in live battle, and was promoted from the ranks to a company grade officer.」

「Yes, you are right. During all that time, the knowledge I learned in books didn't prove useful at all. I always learn from the field with my own eyes, hands and feet— that was my only treasure.」

With the pride of a soldier who earned his commission on the field, the Captain gripped the wind gun tightly with his right hand:

「Most of the elite officers who passed the entrance test of the Military Academy seemed to find me annoying. My opinions differ too much from their views, and in most situation, I had to be the one to give in. I will be lying if I say that it wasn't vexing. But General Remeon is different. He will actively adopt my proposal despite my

roots as a sergeant. Instead of appearances, practicality was more important to him. He values competency over tradition. I was glad—when he praises me, I would feel a refreshing wind blowing in my chest… So I have decided to follow that great man until the very end.」

Captain Gazuriku said as he reached for his waist with his left hand. Yatori called out with her stiff voice:

「—Captain. Please…」

「Please show leniency to my men. They are just following my orders.」

The Captain cut off her plea, and placed a bayonet onto his throat with his left hand. When it noticed this movement, his Sprite called out to its master:

「Corsa, don't!」

「Saro, thank you for all your help.」

After bidding his partner farewell, Captain Gazuriku pushed the bayonet with his hand. Yatori rushed over from the other side of the wall and saw the final moments of a soldier keeling over in a pool of blood.



「… So that's how it ends.」

Major Megu sighed deeply as she looked at the dead body of her colleague lying on top of the debris.

「My apologies, I should captured him alive.」

The vermillion haired girl stood a short distance behind her with a pained expression. The Major shook her head quietly.

「No, don't let it bother you. The results will be the same no matter who negotiated with him… Amongst the officers in the Remeon faction, Captain Gazuriku is exceptionally loyal. He would rather die than be taken prisoner and get relegated into a bargaining chip— He probably fought with such a resolve from the very start.」

「……」

「It had been more than five years, but I shared a drink with him before. Back then, everyone got dead drunk— but me and him were unlucky and didn't get drunk, and had to take care of everyone else… That feels like a lifetime ago.」

Major Megu narrowed her eyes nostalgically, then turned around abruptly:

「… I'm being too sentimental. Go on ahead, First Lieutenant Yatori. It's a painful decision, but we can't waste more time to rescue the injured. We will set off once we are ready.」

As the Major gave her instructions, Yatori looked at Captain Gazuriku and gave a final salute.

She turned and walked away, leading her subordinates with her— she then started mumbling:

「… I don't think of this as a matter that doesn't concern me……」

「Huh?」

Her deputy behind grunted quizzedly. Yatori didn't slow her pace as she continued to speak:

「Of all the forts Alisshi Hanzen built with a planned weakness, this is the only one still in operation today. The others had served their purposes, and got demolished or destroyed.」

「I-Is that so?」

「There are still normal forts without any gimmicks built by Hanzen… However, with the new Blast Cannons developed by Kioka, their value as a stronghold has been diminished. The times of forts being the center of defensive battles is coming to an end.」

As she walked over the debris, the vermillion haired girl thought about this matter. The lingering hopes of a person who died would not be passed on to a further future. In that case, the ruins of this fort was like the corpse left behind by the stubborn old architect.

「No matter how great his accomplishment might be, memories of him will grow faint with the passage of time. No matter how exemplary his skills, theory and ideology might be, it will become outdated one day. Nothing last forever.」

「……」

「And in this ever changing world, Captain Gazuriku died in his pursuit of a different future. His eyes were set on the future until his very last moments.」

Yatori almost said something too sentimental and arrogant for the party that destroyed the Captain's hopes and dreams, and showed restraint by ending the topic:

「… Enough idle chat, let's hurry on.」

She quickened her pace and urged her subordinates on, then looked up. Before her was an endless blue sky that was covered by the ancient fort not too long ago— as she looked at this boundless sky, she felt for a short moment that it was futile to go against her destiny as a descendent of the Igsem.

Just how did it feel to hope for a future one couldn't even imagine—

「Huff… Huff…!」 「Hah, hah!」

In the suffocating darkness, the smell of mud lingered in the air. Aside from the Lantern Light of the Luminous Sprite, there was no other form of illumination.

— There really wasn't anything, not even a speck of star or moonlight, the entire land was engulfed in darkness.

In a corner of the darkness, four soldiers stood shoulder to shoulder as they swung their hoes. The soldiers behind them loaded the dirt onto hand carts and pushed them away. After a certain amount of progress was made, the pioneers would erect pillars to stop the tunnel from caving in.

No one could remember how many times this was repeated. In the dark tunnel, the passage of time lost half of its meaning. Only the gradual accumulation of fatigue and hunger made them feel the that time was flowing.

「Huff, huff—」 「Hey, wait! Stop!」

The sergeant supervising the work shouted from behind the soldiers working their hoes. They turned their dirt covered face back, and the sergeant lift his gaze from the map in his hand and said:

「… According to the plans, we are almost there. Be more careful with the excavation.」

The soldiers' eyes lit up at that. After receiving the orders to be dig with care, their hands worked their hoes even faster. The fruits of their endless hard labour was at hand, and the soldiers quickened their pace—

「—Ah!」

One of the soldiers yell suddenly. His hoe broke through the dirt without resistance part of the way. He retracted the hoe, then

pushed the blade in again. He then repeated this step from a different angle, making a rectangular hole.

「Ohh—」「Uwah……」「Ahh……!」

A beam of light shone in from the hole. It was obviously the brightness of sunlight, and stung the eyes of the soldiers who had grown used to the darkness.

The group looked at each other with joy, and turned back to their supervisor behind:

「We dug through it! We made it through～!」

When they heard the shouts of the soldiers running back from the tunnel, the other Kioka soldiers working on the same project cheered. In retrospect, the project had gone on for more than half a year. Everyone trapped in the Hiored Ore Mines yearned for this news.

「Yeah!」「We tunneled through!」「Report to the Colonel! Quick!」

Without needing his comrades to urge him, the messenger had already dashed out. The feelings of excitement made them forget their fatigue. The messenger stumbled through the base, and reached the headquarters in no time.

「Colonel! Report, the tunnel has been completed!」

He knocked the door and yelled without waiting for a response, but didn’t get an answer after waiting for some time. When he was feeling that something wasn’t right, a soldier passing by cleared his doubts:

「Colonel Arkinex went to survey the enemy base, and should be at the western part of the base.」

After a curt reply, the soldier started running again. Despite getting out of breath, his legs that wanted to relay the good news didn’t slow down.

The messenger reached the western part of the base shortly, and saw the white haired officer standing with a group of soldiers. He wanted to shout 「We tunneled through!」, but remembered that this place was close to enemy grounds. He suppressed his urge at the last moment, and approached slowly:

「Colonel, the tunnel—」

As the messenger reported as quietly as possible— he felt that group had a tense air about them.

「... What's going on?」

As a hasty bird took flight in the breaking dawn, Kioka Army Colonel Jean Arkinex watched the enemy base through his telescope as he muttered. His companions First Lieutenant Miara Gin and Captain Taznyado Harrah stood on either side of him with stiff faces.

From Jean's position, he could see the imperial army that had encircled the ore mines was marching to the west with a long procession. They seemed to have marched for quite some time now, with the leading elements disappearing behind the horizon.

「They seem... to be withdrawing. Most of their forces here are gone...」

Miara Gin gave her cautious opinion. Harrah nodded seriously after hearing that:

「It seems that we have won.」

He was implying that things probably wasn't that simple. Jean felt the same, and tried to deduce the reason from the unexpected scene before his eyes:

「*Mum... This might be a trap. They might be lifting the siege intentionally to trick us into escaping the mines. Those units might be feigning a retreat, and will detour to our back to ambush us when we withdraw...」

「That might be plausible… But I doubt that dark haired brat will propose such a plan. During the last meeting, he completely saw through how stubbornly we want to hold on to this fort.」

Harrah said with his arms crossed. Holding out here until reinforcements arrive— that was their plan. If that was the case, they wouldn't abandon the mines and flee even if the siege was lifted. Judging from the previous talks with the enemy, the enemy also understands that.

「If it isn't a trap… then did something unexpected happened? Maybe something urgent happened back in their home country. Something so important that they had to go back even if they had to give up on seizing the mines.」

「If that is so, then it must be pretty serious. Something that can shake the whole Empire.」

「And… What might that be?」

「Well, for example— a large scale civil unrest.」

When the white haired officer said the most likely answer in his mind, Miara Gin gasped.

「Leaving our own nation aside, the Empire has plenty of underlying issues. The Shinaak we incited last time is one of them. I heard they were exiled from the Grand Arfatra Mountains and relocated to a plains, but there is still a possibility of them revolting again.」

「If they did, they will be suppressed quickly. The Shinaak has lost our backing and the advantage of terrain, no matter how hard they try, they won't be able to start a revolt big enough to break the Empire.」

「That is true, any potential unrest they might cause won't be enough to make them withdraw their entire army. It should be another reason. Maybe— it's the military. Maybe the Imperial

military, which is the base of the Empire, is the reason behind their troubles.」

Jean knew that the Empire's military posed the biggest threat of unrest. The two large factions of their military had a long history of rifts, and if this smothering tinder erupted into an inferno, just how wide would the fire spread— Jean couldn't even imagine that.

「… No, instead of playing detective here, we need to confirm this.」

Jean restrained himself from rushing to a conclusion. Doing so would cloud his mind with flawed prejudice, and lead to a crushing defeat. The awareness of Ikuta Solork's presence demanded the white haired officer to be extra cautious.

「E-Erm, Colonel…」

Someone called out to him timidly from behind. Jean finally remembered that his subordinate was here to make a report, put his thoughts on hold and turned back:

「Ah, pardon me. Any reports?」

「Y-Yes! We have just bored through the tunnel!」

The soldier smiled in relief after finally making his report. When they heard that, his Kioka comrades rushed to him.

「Wonderful! This is great news, how is the progress with the tunnel?」

「Yes Sir! With our current speed, it will be big enough for horses in about two hours!」

「Good. Once the preparations are done, send a section of scouts to recon. Harrah, I will leave the selection of the team to you.」

「Got it. I will pick a bunch of quick and careful guys.」

Harrah ran back to the base with his orders. Jean watched him go, thinking that this was the best hand he could play now. However—

the white haired officer looked in the direction of the retreating enemy through his telescope again.

「… Is this a trap, Ikuta Solork? If that is so, I won't hesitate in ignoring it. But if it's not— then we might meet again in a different battlefield.」

Jean said to his absent opponent. His personal feelings that had nothing to do with tactical advantages burned in Jean Arkinex's heart. Arkinex was aware that they were commanders on opposing sides, but this emotion still grew stronger with each passing day.

「I'm a soldier. If you show a fatal opening because you get distracted with your internal unrest, I won't hesitate in stabbing you in the back— However…」

He tightened his grip on his telescope. His silver eyes seemed determined to relay his feelings to beyond the western horizon:

「If possible, don't let me see that boring back. I understand this is just a childish obsession. But even so… I want to stab you from the front when I kill you…!」



Chapter 2

Three Way Fight

To the east of central Katjvarna was the Miogaroki Province. Its main product were figs, pomegranates, papayas and other fruits, and had many heritage sites before the 「Three Loyal House」 united the Empire— and was known for these legacy sites from the warring era.

They were all different in scale, but if you ask the local which one was the largest, they would all answer 「Zalulu Hunger Castle」. That building was undoubtedly the biggest in size and had the strongest backstory in the entire province. Surrounded by a fence that looked like a field of spears, it had three intimidating towers of uneven height, and gave off an eerie aura.

The castle was built over 400 years ago, and could still serve as a defensive stronghold. This wasn't because of the architect's timeless design, but because the place was renovated many times throughout the years. The Igsem faction had maintained this castle in private for use in the event of a national emergency.

The name 「Zalulu Hunger Castle」 originated from the horrible death of Marquis Barne Zalulu who ruled the region back then. Forces from the 「Three Loyal House」 seeking to unite the nation scored numerous victory against the army opposing them, and that army was forced to use this castle as their grave.

Marquis Zalulu held on to this castle with just 600 soldiers, and refused to accept his defeat despite being surrounded by an army of 10,000. He forbid his men from surrendering and ordered them to fight to the last.

However, unlike the Marquis who was hoping to take his pride to his grave, his troops were growing tired of their lord's antics. With inevitable defeat at hand, they realized that they had chosen the

wrong side. The soldiers who chose their lives over their pride discussed in secret, and decided to sell out the Marquis for their own safety— and the method they used was the reason behind this tragedy.

What they did was simple. When the Marquis went into his personal chambers on the sixth floor of the castle, they nailed the door shut from the outside. With the only exit sealed, the Marquis was trapped, and the soldiers hoist the white flag and let the enemy in. The commander of the Three Loyal Houses didn't break down the door leading into the Marquis' room, and said to him from the corridor— if you relinquish your authority and yield to us, I will open this door.

Marquis Zalulu was furious, and refute that humiliating offer. The commander didn't say anything more, and just ignored the room and the person inside— that was how the Marquis died.

The portable water inside the room prolonged his suffering. The Marquis slowly withered after more than a month. He couldn't escape from the sixth floor window, which became an outlet to spread his groans of anguish and agony.

Thirty six days after he was confined to his room, the room turned silent and the commander finally broke the door down. There were many rumours on what happened next— the most well known rumour states that the bones on the Marquis' arms were bare, and that the Marquis chewed them off because he was too hungry.

Because of this tragedy, the castle in the Miogaroki Province had the nickname of 「Zalulu Hunger Castle」. There were countless ghost stories related to this castle, such as groans from the windows of the sixth floor, and an old man with skeletal arms wandering the corridors. Some soldiers who were more timid would cry if they got posted there.

「Okay～ What do we do now?」

Right now, in the sixth floor 「confined room」 of the Hunger Castle known for its bloody history, two soldiers unfazed by the rumours sat inside. Honorary General Yorunzaf Igsem sat arrogantly with his feet on the table and head held high:

「The central military headquarters in the capital Banhataal— or rather, all the prominent military facilities in central had been seized by the Remeon faction, and they even sealed the roads, so it will be difficult to link up with the Igsem factions in the other provinces. We have been completely cut off.」

In contrast to what he was saying, 「One Armed Igsem」 sounded intrigued. On the other hand, Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem stared out of the only window in the room and remained as quiet as a statue.

「Sigh, it's not all bad news though. The Field Marshal is safe and has an army of 4,000 with him. This place is a little rundown, but we have a base of operation. This is good enough for us to launch a counterattack.」

「……」

「And now, the problem is the Emperor. How long will we remain the official army?」

When Yorunzaf said that, Field Marshal Igsem broke the silence for the first time:

「—No. According to imperial law, an edict issued during a coup to illegally transfer military authority cannot overturn the edict issued before that. Hence, it doesn't matter if any edicts will be issued in the future, we will always be the official army.」

「That might be true legally, but an edict will still be issued, right? It's the same with the Jewel Voice Broadcast. Just one sentence will be enough to convince the people who aren't legal experts.」

<TL: 玉音放送
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jewel_Voice_Broadcast>

Thinking things through pragmatically, the old general crossed his legs on the table the other way.

「But there's something I don't get— why hasn't that happened yet?」

「……」

「If I was that Terushinha kid, I will force His Majesty to issue an edict that 『Terushinha Remeon will succeed Solvenares Igsem as the highest ranking commander of the Imperial Army』, even if I had to strangle him. Even without any legal basis, getting the Emperor to verbally support your cause is the correct move to make. It will be more than enough to agitate those people pretending to be patriots.」

After stating his view boldly, General Yorunzaf grunted:

「If it is possible, anyone will do that in this situation. But he didn't which mean an issue had happened which prevents him from issuing an edict… How would the Remeon faction treat the Emperor? They wouldn't purge the royals and enact a military dictatorship, right?」

It would be too hasty for them to do that right now— the old general's words might be deemed dangerous, depending the way it was interpreted. However, he was just thinking about things by putting himself in the enemy's shoes. Field Marshal Igsem didn't complain as he understood that, and continued the conversation:

「Or His Majesty's health is ailing.」

「Yes, His Majesty have not been well for a long time, it might be possible that he is too sick to issue an edict— Hey, Zeoh! Who is the current Emperor of the Katjvarna Empire?」

The fire Sprite sitting on the armrest of its master's chair answered immediately:

「Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik.」

「—Oh? At least he is still alive.」

The General leaned back on his chair without looking particularly concerned.

When the Emperor pass away, according to the norm, his partner Sprite who saw him off will announce his death to all Imperial citizens. That was done through the 「Jewel Voice Broadcast」 — a miraculous method where all the Sprites in the Empire would say the same thing. This method could also be used to issue imperial edicts, and this ability was the reason behind the Emperor's heavenly mandate.

The Jewel Voice Broadcast after the Emperor's passing might be delayed, but all the Sprites in the Empire shares real time knowledge on who was the 「current Emperor」. This meant that at the moment the Emperor's partner Sprite saw him die, the other Sprites would also learn that fact. According to imperial law, when the current Emperor passes away, the next person in the line of succession will be declared the new Emperor.

And so— if the Sprite witnessed the death of the current Emperor, the answer to General Yorunzaf's question could not be 「Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik」.

「Strictly speaking, if they isolate the partner Sprite, it is possible to hide the death of the Emperor… But that is a serious crime, and there is no reason for the Remeon faction to resort to that. If the Emperor is dead, they just need to push the next royal in line to be the new Emperor. The First Prince is in their hands, correct?」

「That is most certainly it. The only royals that can escape the hands of the Remeon faction would be the Second Prince in Saregita Province of the Southern territories, and the Third Princess who is working under Major General Saba in the former Eastern Territories.」

「We can’t do anything about the Second Prince, but was it a mistake not to recall the Third Princess from the Eastern Territories? Yatorishino’s group is rushing over from there, correct?」

「No, if we let a royal join in the fast march, there might be delays as we will need to avoid danger. The priority right now is to gather our forces as quickly as possible.」

「… That’s true. In this situation, instead of the Third Princess, getting the troops to rush back speedily is more important. If we don’t recall him, Saba will just watch quietly from the sidelines. Entrusting the Third Princess to him might be the best move.」

The enlightened old general nodded. Instead of forcibly recalling them and adding more uncertainty, they should let the grey forces remain grey— that was the plan of Field Marshal Igsem. And he wouldn’t seek the aid of the navy for the same reasons.

「… Back to the topic, I can’t figure out why the Remeon faction didn’t issue any edicts. I can think of two possibilities. The Emperor is too sick to issue one, or the Emperor isn’t in the Remeon faction’s hands—」

「……」

「If I have to say, the latter seem more plausible. My gut feeling tells me that the Remeon faction’s movement in recent days lack confidence. Assuming they have secured the Emperor, they should be more forceful with their attacks, instead of watching us from afar like this.」

General Yorunzaf said as he pointed out the open door on the other side of the room. Beyond the window in the corridor, a Remeon unit blockading the western road could be clearly seen. But they didn’t make any preparation to attack the castle, and was content with keeping watch over the Igsem faction holing up inside, and preventing reinforcements from joining them.

「In any case, having a royal with us will have huge significance in the coming days. The Emperor or the First Prince— if we can secure one of them, we might be able to even the odds.」

General Yorunzaf raised the corner of the lips, as if he was enjoying being the underdog.

「… By the way, those guys aren't defending the east at all. They seem to think reinforcement will come from the west— from within the capital?」

「We can deduce that a large number of Remeon unit has been deployed along the Kudra mountain pass and other routes leading to the Hiored Ore Mines in the east, and they judged that this would be enough for their eastern defence.」

「Haha! They are looking down on the Igsem faction!」

The old general slapped his knee and laugh. Field Marshal Igsem who was looking out the eastern window nodded in agreement:

「— That's correct.」

In his field of vision, the figure of a friendly force rushing towards him from beyond the horizon could be seen.

Until they entered the castle, there wasn't any battle. The Remeon faction not expecting reinforcements to come from the other direction was one reason, and the second reason was— After a traveling more than a thousand miles in 15 days, a pace beyond common sense, the 2,000 soldiers were relatively unharmed and gave off an intimidating aura.

「First Lieutenant Yatorishino Igsem reporting in.」

Eighteen days after a coup was staged in the heart of the Empire, a little after 11am, after confirming all the troops had entered the castle, Yatori and the unit commander Major Megu reported in to Field Marshal Igsem:

「You came earlier than expected. Long time no see, Yatorishino, well done.」

Yatori calmly answered the greetings from the 「other」 Igsem standing beside Field Marshal.

「I'm flattered, but you should direct that towards Major Megu, Honorary General Yorunzaf.」

「I told you to not greet your grand uncle by his military rank! Damn you pair of father and daughter!」

After saluting her grand uncle who let out a deep sigh, the vermillion haired girl turned to her father:

「—Field Marshal Sir, can I ask about the coup and the current situation?」

「The Remeon faction started by suppressing the Banhataal capital and the Military Central headquarters, and seized control of the military bases in Central. They have blockaded the roads and cut off communications between us and the friendly forces in other regions. Including the forces in this castle and the reinforcements, we have around 6,000 men. In contrast, the Remeon faction has 20,000 soldiers taking part in the coup. In short, we are at a disadvantage.」

The Field Marshal answered plainly. Neither the content nor his tone sound like a conversation between parent and child. Major Megu watched the steel-like interaction between the two Igsem with bated breath.

「First Lieutenant Yatorishino, I hereby promote you to Major, and Brevet Lieutenant Colonel.」
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brevet_(military)>

「Yes Sir.」

Yatori wasn't fazed by the sudden promotion. It would be unsightly for an Igsem in active service, who had to lead by example in such a dire situation, to only hold the rank of a company grade officer. On

the way back here, she thought there might be a need to quicken her promotion.

「Major Nudakka Megu.」

「Yes Sir!」

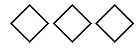
「I want you to assist Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino as her deputy. Do you have any objections?」

The Field Marshal asked seriously, and after a brief moment, she shook her head with a dry smile.

「… Even after breaking through the Kudra mountain pass swiftly, I estimated that the journey from the Hiored Ore Mines to here would take at least eighteen days. The one who shortened it to fifteen days… is your daughter. And she did so without losing any of our men, so General Yorunzaf was right in complimenting her.」

When he heard Major Megu's words that sounded as if she was surrendering, the old general grunted as if that was a given. Field Marshal Igsem nodded and continued:

「— All field officers are to gather in the sixth floor commander's office for a war conference.」
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Field_officer>



All four city walls had been sealed, and the residents had been advised to stay in their homes. Right now, the capital Banhataal was under lock down. The empty streets made it hard to imagine this was the usual bustling capital, and the Remeon faction soldiers had replaced the corrupt nobles of the past to form a temporary government. And in the palace deep within the city...

「… Why…」

In the elegant conference room surrounded by famous paintings— this place was used for policy discussion, but the nobles tasked with

this important role were all dead. Alone with his adjutant in this luxurious room, General Terushinha Remeon was deeply troubled:

「… Why did reality deviate from my plan so much…!」

He groaned. From the coup until now, there had been too many unexpected problems.

First of all, Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem should have been captured in the military central headquarters. But he fled the base with 4,000 soldiers, barely shook off the pursuit by the Remeon faction and holed himself up in the 「Zalulu Hunger Castle」 of the Miogaroki Province.

For General Remeon, this was a serious deviation from his plans. He sent more than one company of wind gunners to capture Field Marshal Igsem who was alone. He picked the team carefully, and delegated command to the trustworthy veteran Colonel Saru Kualun, and was confident that even the strongest swordsman in the continent wouldn't be able to escape this trap— However…

「General Yorunzaf… the long retired 『One armed Igsem』, just had to pick this time to visit the base, what an awful joke. We only planned to herd in one lion, but a second one jumped into the fray out of nowhere!」

The second Igsem. The ultimate joker card that threw a spanner into General Remeon's plans. There was no way to plan for this. An old man in his seventies whose command capability and swordsmanship remained the same as his prime, and still posed the threat of a hundred man— who on earth could expect something so ridiculous?

「… Even so, I still should have made contingency for this. Because I'm the commander, this is my duty. In the end, Kualun's unit lost their lives because of my poor command…」

「General Sir, please calm down…」

「Not just that. After Sol escaped the base— he actually went to the『Zalulu Hunger Castle』? Impossible! Not the Central second or third base, but a moldy castle built 4 centuries ago! It is preserved as a historical heritage site, but there's no way it is tough enough for military use!」

Cutting off his adjutant's words, the jade eyed general grit his teeth. The Igsem faction's preventive measures against the General Remeon's coup attempt worked splendidly. The maintenance of the castle must have been done in secret without letting the Remeon faction know about its intent. The military bases in Central had been secured in the coup, and he made arrangement to stop any escape attempts out of Central— and Field Marshal Igsem already made provisions for all that.

「Sol is leading the Igsem faction with 4,000 men. With so many people defending the fort, it will be difficult to crush their resistance…」

In theory, if he commits all the Remeon forces into attacking the castle, taking the Hunger Castle was quite plausible. However, he would need to recall the troops deployed at the Central bases, the capital, and those blockading the road. If he did that, the Igsem forces in the other regions would notice that something was wrong, and hurry to the Field Marshal's side and take back the bases and capital which have compromised defences.

「The Remeon faction and Igsem faction are about even in numbers… If we fight an all out war, we will destroy each other, and Kioka will be the only ones that will be happy about that. I can't afford to force the issue with brute force…!」

The burden of the nation's future weighed down on the General. He felt as if all the bones in his body was creaking from the pressure… However, Field Marshal Igsem also want to avoid an all

out war. And so, the coup would evolved into a negotiations with the backing of their forces, and to fight for bargaining chips.

「We need to produce effective bargaining chips to get the Igsem faction to surrender… The most effective move is to let the Emperor issue an edict to recognize us as the official army. We will then have the just authority, and give the Igsem faction a sense of defeat.」

The morale of the Igsem faction was high because of their pride as they were the 「official army」. The general was planning to use the first edict to make then waver, and let the First Prince who will take the throne in the near future express his support of the Remeon faction through the 「Jewel Voice Broadcast」 as a follow up. The Igsem faction would then lose their spirits.

「But, but… Trisnai! Where… have you hidden His Majesty!?」

After shouting the name of his sworn enemy that wasn't here, General Remeon slammed his fist onto the table before him. This was one of his biggest failure, second to his failure to capture Field Marshal Igsem.

Shortly after the coup, his top priority was to protect the Emperor, and led this mission personally. After checking all the information available to him, General Remeon was certain that the Emperor and Chancellor Trisnai were in the restricted palace.

This indirect information wasn't foolproof. So he took extra care and sent spies into the palace several days before the coup. His agents reported back periodically without fail, and up to the night before, they confirmed that the Emperor and Trisnai were still in the palace.

But when General Remeon's team broke into the Emperor's chambers, it was empty. They searched every corner of the restricted palace and uncovered several chamber rooms, but they were all vacant. The Emperor and chancellor had vanished into thin air.

… No, more accurately speaking, they had some findings. In a room on the second floor, they found someone who closely resembles Trisnai, dressed in khaki robes of a high ranking bureaucrat. General Remeon concluded that his agents were fooled by Trisnai's body double, and the sly fox had outmaneuvered him.

「We can't issue an edict without His Majesty… If we can't issue an edict that supports the Remeon faction, then the Igsem faction will keep up their morale as the official army. This coup is slowly sinking into the worst quagmire…」

「… General Sir.」

「What should I do… I-I have to think of a way. I'm the one who dragged all these shoulders down into a civil war, the responsibility lies with me…!」

「Sir!」

A strong impact hit the cheeks of the jade eyed general who was falling into a cycle of self loath. General Remeon turned stiff from surprise, and the familiar face of a woman leaned close to him, with her palms on his cheeks.

「……Lieutenant Colonel Lucika……」

「Have you snapped out of it yet?」

She looked right into General Remeon jade eyes with a sharp gaze. The one who boldly interrupted his train of thought was the general's adjutant, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Kursk. She was a female officers close to her forties, and some of her gossipy subordinates gave her the nickname of 「Ice Lady」.

「This isn't the time for self reproach, General Terushinha Remeon. It's not the time to figure out who is to blame, but to come up with a practical plan to break through this crisis. If we can't achieve results, then there is no meaning in struggling and worrying about all this. Do you understand?」

「… Y-Yes…」

「Very good. Then stop with all your 『it's my fault』. That's just a waste of time.」

After saying that coldly, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika retracted her hands from her superior's face. His face was still stinging from the pain as General Remeon finally realized how unhealthy his thought process was just now:

「… Thank you, Lieutenant Colonel. You broke me out of my rut. That was unsightly of me.」

He reverted to his usual dignified tone, and thanked his adjutant.

「It's fine. I expected this might happen when the two of us are alone in this room.」

The General smiled awkwardly when he heard Lieutenant Colonel Lucika say that without any reservation. They had worked together for a long time now, and he couldn't hide this side of him from her. Since a long time ago, pulling the general out of his cycle of self loath had been the job of his adjutant.

「There's nothing to be embarrassed about. The general's careful and intrinsic thinking is both a pro and a con. We just have to think of a solution to this.」

「I'm thankful for your forthright advice, although your method is a bit too harsh.」

「If you want someone to remind you gently, you can just ask your wife. But in order to return to your home that you yearn for, we have to settle the troublesome matters on hand first.」

His adjutant's sarcastic encouragement pushed General Remeon to regain his composure, and he reviewed at the problems again.

「… I need to think about this carefully. Without Sol and the Emperor, we are at a disadvantage. What should we do now?」

「We have two choices. We can try to win without any good cards in our hand, or we can try drawing the good cards we missed last time.」

「It is impossible to capture Sol without fighting an all out battle. As for the Emperor… Assuming the Igsem faction has him, the same conditions will apply.」

「Then we need to confirm if that is true.」

Lieutenant Colonel Lucika said plainly. The jade eyed general nodded seriously:

「… So we probe them for information. Will Sol be agreeable to a meeting?」

「That's very likely. Both sides want to probe the other for information.」

We aren't the only side that had been forced into a corner— After interpreting the Lieutenant Colonel's words as such, General Remeon started narrowing down his options. But at that moment, an urgent knocking came from the door:

「Captain Kinerigo here! General, I have something to report!」

「Enter!」

With the permission of the General, Captain Kinerigo barged into the room and briefed the General:

「Reinforcements had arrived from the east and linked up with the enemy in the castle! They number over 2000! The unit on watch is wary of a pincer attack from the Hunger Castle, and couldn't stop the two groups from joining up!」

「… From the east, huh.」

This terrible news made the jade eyes general grit his teeth loudly. Lieutenant Colonel Lucika looked at him worryingly from the side, but he was still a general of an army, and didn't lost his cool:

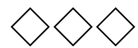
「If they arrived at this time, that means after the Hiored Ore Mines campaign received news of the coup, they returned by the shortest route through Kudra mountain pass. And they numbered 2,000— which is roughly all the Igsem forces that we expect them to recall. They made it here without any losses— it seems that I had been too optimistic.」

That last line was like a punch to his own face, and General Remeon completed his analysis of the current situation:

「The number of troops garrisoned in the Hunger Castle is now 6,000, enough to defend their base and send out a large detachment unit… We can't afford to take our time with our preparations.」

「… That's right. Your orders please, General Sir.」

His adjutant urged him quietly. Under the watchful gazes of his two subordinates, the jade eyed general decided on his next move.



In that very evening, Field Marshal Igsem agreed to General Remeon's proposal to hold a meeting without any hesitation. As Lieutenant Colonel Lucika predicted, both sides wanted to probe their opponents for information.

After negotiating back and forth through their messengers, both sides agreed to hold the meeting in the middle of the Orumaoi plains, which was between the Third Central base and the Hunger Castle. A vast plain that was open for tens of miles in all direction, neither side needed to worry about ambushes and traps.

「… Long time no see, Field Marshal Igsem.」

Under the cloudy sky that reflected the state of the situation, the two generals each led a battalion of cavalry as they met again for the first time in a long while.

「Stand down, General Remeon. You're not saving the nation, and is splitting our country apart instead.」

Field Marshal Igsem used his position as the highest ranking officer of the Imperial Army to warn the rebel. General Remeon wasn't fazed, and glared right back at his opponent:

「… That's the first thing you want to say? You are still the same, stubbornly following the rules of the army.」

「That's correct. Soldiers are only permitted to use force within the rules set by the government. You have crossed that line.」

「Just call me a traitor if you want to! It's many times better than a dog that looks on as his country spirals into destruction!」

The jade eyed general roared. He knew it was meaningless, but he still voiced his emotions of righteous that was driving his actions:

「You should know very well! If we let the nobles abuse the government, the future of the Empire will be grim! Those fools who deploy the military for their own selfish desires instead of the good of the Empire have no right to lead the people! They belong in the furnace of hell!」

「That's just your personal opinion. Soldiers should not interfere with politics.」

「Personal opinion…? You still think this is my personal opinion after seeing this situation? Open your eyes! Half of the imperial soldiers that used to serve under you concur with my view, and joined me in staging this coup! The right path of a soldier that you speak off had been reduced to empty gestures a long time ago! Our revolt is just!」

「That is not true.」

Field Marshal refuted General Remeon's passionate views with an iciness that could even freeze steel.

「Soldiers revolting in the name of justice will just lay the seed of tyranny. If you seize the position of authority without any legal basis, you will soon be disposed of by another usurper. When such

struggles for power becomes the norm, we will enter an era of chaos. That is what you are going to start.」

「No! I started this coup for the sake of peace! Given how corrupted the nobles are, who do you think should helm this ship? Who should the people place their trust in? Who else but us soldiers of course! This is the process of elimination! The Empire can only be saved if competent men like us lead the way!」

「No. Soldiers starting a coup to save a nation will only accelerate its destruction. Military might that voluntarily shakes off the restraints of the collar of law, can't be controlled for real anymore. So it will destroy the nation and cast the people into chaos and lawlessly, until order is established again. It might take one, two, or even three centuries to do so, and the Empire of the past took an even longer time to break free of the chaos.」

「Not taking action is the worst decision you can make, and indirectly caused this result! There's no point in worrying about the chaos in the future, our destruction because of the corruption is happening right now! Who will avert this crisis?」

「Only the official government can solve the issues with governance, not you.」

That answer made General Remeon face palmed himself:

「… You still have expectations towards the nobles? Or are you referring to His Majesty? You think His Majesty who is being hoodwinked by that sly fox will come to his senses tomorrow and rule in a proper way…? Stop kidding me. I know you are not someone that is so senseless.」

General Remeon hung his head low, and continued as if he was moaning:

「Let me hear your voice, Sol… Not as an Igsem, but as a friend.」

A deep silence fell between the two generals. After a long pause, Field Marshal Igsem spoke again.

「— If inevitable destruction awaits our country in the future...」

「……」

「We will have only one duty. To defend our nation until the day of our demise.」

This answer highlighted the insurmountable gulf between the two men.

The jade eyed general hope to save the country on the verge of destruction.

The fiery haired general swear to defend the nation until the day it fell.

Their paths were infinitely close, but would never cross like two parallel lines.

「… So that's your answer.」

General Remeon said with an emotionless tone… They had this conversation numerous times, and he already knew the answer. The general felt weak for asking despite knowing the answer, and an insuppressible anger welled up within him:

「Enough— the conversation between friends is over. It is time for the negotiation between enemies.」

The serious fiery haired general met the sharp gaze of the jade eyed general. When both of them were about to condemn each other as an enemy— At that instant, they were interrupted by a rider charging in from the east:

「F-Field Marshal! Urgent report!」

「Proceed.」

The messenger who made his way around to the front reported to the Field Marshal quietly, careful not to let General Remeon overhear him:

「… An army is approaching from the east. It’s an imperial army numbering almost 10,000. We suspect that they are the entire campaign force sent to attack the Hiored Ore Mines…!」

Field Marshal’s face didn’t waver after hearing the report, and after thinking for a moment, he turned back to General Remeon.

「— I request for this meeting to be adjourned.」

「What?」

「I have received a report of an army approaching from the east. They appear to be imperial forces, but I didn’t send for them. Is this your doing, General Remeon.」

Unlike the man before him, the jade eyed general look shaken. From how his face was twitching, Field Marshal Igsem judged that neither side expected this.

「I will be pulling back. We will reconvene after figuring the allegiance of this new force.」

「… I-I concur.」

General Remeon nodded bitterly, and the two units separated to the east and west. On his way back to headquarters, the unexpected stoppage threw the mind of the general into disarray:

「What’s going on… Major General Kubalha Saba, aren’t you going to watch on the sidelines?」

At the same time, the unexpected situation caused the Hunger Castle to fall into chaos, and only one girl stood by calmly.

「— I see. You came.」

From the castle window overwatching the eastern horizon, several long columns of an army could be seen marching in. They hoist the flags of the Empire, but with the current military divided it wasn’t sure who this group would side with.

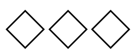
Hence, their presence would have a huge impact on all factions in the Empire.

「L-Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino, that's…!」

「Calm down, there's no need to be so surprised.」

She cautioned her panicking subordinates in a calm tone— That's right, she was the only one who knew. She understood why the new unit was here, and what their goal was. The vermillion haired girl accepted the arrival of that army, with full knowledge of their position and motive.

「I know you are a man of your words.」



In the afternoon of the twentieth day after the coup, a new force appeared from the east. After noting the army garrisoned in the Hunger Castle, they diverted their advance to the north of the Miogaroki Province and set up a temporary camp there. On that same day, the Igsem faction and Remeon faction both received an invitation to a three way conference between the top commanders. The invitation was signed by Major General Kubalha Saba.

Field Marshal and the General had no reason to refuse. Which side the third force choose to align with would have serious influence on this coup. To win the advantage of numbers, they had to recruit Kubalha Saba to their cause.

At the agreed time the next morning, considering the position of the three forces, the second meeting was moved to the northeast region of the Orumaoi plains. It was also a cloudy day, and with the strong air current in the sky, there was no telling if the weather would clear up or worsen in an hour.

「……」 「……」

Similar to yesterday, Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon arrived on scene with a battalion of cavalry. After a glance at each other, they didn't say a word. They were putting the probing questions on hold for now, and focusing on the opponent that would be arriving shortly.

They waited longer than expected. About twenty minutes after their arrival, the last unit finally appeared over the horizon. Maybe they were not aware about their own tardiness, or this was some sort of psychological tactic— the approaching cavalry was frustratingly slow.

「Pardon me, it seems that we are late.」

Major General Kubalha Saba appeared on horseback in the center of their formation. Contrary to his apology, his demeanour was dignified and his face seemed refreshed, completely different from two months ago.

The jade eyed general was surprised by this change, but he still glared at this new opponent together with the fiery haired general.

「I have not issued any recall order to the Hiored Ore Mines campaign force. State your reason for your return, Major General Saba.」

That was the first thing Field Marshal Igsem asked. Major General Saba shook his head:

「Field Marshal Sir, I'm in no position to answer that question. Right now, I'm merely the chief of staff of this regiment.」

「I never give you such an appointment. You are still the regimental commander of the ore mines campaign force.」

「That unit has been disbanded, I'm not the commander any more.」

Major General Saba answered with an arrogant attitude, but ironically, they found his demeanour very familiar. Standing proud without any humility at all times, and retorting higher ranked officers without fear— that was his personality about twenty years ago.

「… What's your goal, Major General Saba? What are you trying to do by interfering at this point in time?」

The baffling sense of nostalgia made General Remeon blink in confusion, and he questioned Saba directly. He wanted to recruit him, but he couldn't make sense of Saba's intentions.

「My answer is the same, General. I'm in no position to answer.」

「What do you mean!」

「Because the only ones qualified to make such a statement, are the top commanders of each faction.」

With that, Major General Saba pulled the reins on his horse to the side, as if he was returning to his rightful place. Two figures rode up from behind and into the vacant spot. One of them was a jade eyed youth with a stiff face, and the other was a dark haired youth that was controlling his horse with unskilled movements.

「Here, here— Hey, not there. Forward, forward.」

Nudging his horse that refused to move ahead in a straight path, the youth finally made it to the fore of his group and faced the two generals.

「Phew～ it's great that we reached here successfully… Ah, good afternoon. Field Marshal Sir, General Sir. I'm the commander of the Independent Imperial All Territories Stronghold, the 『Rising Sun Regiment』, Ikuta Sankrei. This is my adjutant First Lieutenant Torway Remeon. Nice to meet you.」

When he said that with a silly smile, General Remeon's face started cramping up:

「Ikuta… Sankrei?」

The general said this unforgettable name as if he was saying some taboo. In that moment, even the existence of his son disappeared from his field of vision.

After a heavy silence, his jade eyes shot a murderous glance at the dark haired youth and Major General Saba.

「You think that joke is funny?」

「Huh, you don’t think it is? Major General Saba laughed really hard at it though.」

「Shut up!」

The general yelled at the youth. The corner of his eyes raised in anger:

「That is the name of a good friend of mine that I lost a long time ago…! It’s not for brats like you to use in a joke!」

General Remeon showed his strong displeasure— but Ikuta wasn’t fazed by this rage or retorted back, and showed a complicated smile:

「So you still call him your friend… I guess I should be happy about that.」

「You…! You still mock—」 「That emblem.」

The Field Marshal’s words drowned out the general who wasn’t done yet. Ignoring the baffled general aside, the fiery haired general stared at the emblem of the brilliant sun on the youth’s chest.

「To think it had been preserved to this day… So you used the emblem of the rising sun and inherited your father’s regiment?」

「Sol? Even you…」

「That’s how it is. Hence, I am their highest ranking commander.」

The youth looked at the soldiers behind him and said. After falling into complete confusion, General Remeon slowly realized something from the conversation between the Field Marshal and the youth:

「W-Wait… Sol, hold up…! C-Could it be—」

「His background is real. That man is undoubtedly the son of the late General Bada Sankrei.」

The testament from the Field Marshal was strong enough to blow away all of the general’s thoughts. The jade eyed general stared with his eyes wide open, and was dumbstruck. Field Marshal Igsem took over the conversation in the meantime:

「But that is all. Command of the 『Rising Sun Regiment』 isn't hereditary. The authority of the emblem to muster units during times of emergency is only recognized when the regiment is still a part of the Imperial military command structure.」

Field Marshal judged with a firm attitude. Ikuta nodded after hearing that:

「… That's correct.」

「Hence, First Lieutenant Ikuta Sankrei, you are not the highest ranking commander of this regiment, and you may not call this unit the 『Rising Sun Regiment』. Know your place, you are just a company grade officer.」

「Yes, I'm fine with going back to that position. But after I have accomplished my goal.」

The youth gave a thick skinned reply. The Field Marshal turned his gaze towards Major General Saba once more.

「I hereby order Major General Kubalha Saba to fulfil your obligation as a soldier, and assume command of your unit again.」

「I refuse, Field Marshal Sir. Because I have always been the type to strive towards the light.」

He didn't hesitate in his answer. General Remeon who snapped out of his gaze said in place of the Field Marshal:

「… With the nation shaking in turmoil, you are pushing the youth with the lineage of a famous general as the figurehead to build a new world order— is that the path towards the light that you are hoping for, Major General Saba? We haven't met for a while, and your way of thinking have regressed 500 years.」

「General, I already explained many times before, that I'm just the chief of staff. As for the path towards the light, you will have to ask the Regiment Commander before you.」

「Have you forgotten your sense of shame, Kubalha Saba? Are you trying to make a youth that is less than half your age shoulder the crime of starting a revolution? This is beyond unsightly for a soldier, and plain inhuman!」

This strong accusation made Major General Saba open his eyes wide:

「Ridiculous— I drank all of my shame dry a long time ago! Ever since our sun was sacrificed by the villains in court, I have swallowed all of my pride along with the despair of my powerlessness!」

His roar from the bottom of his heart shook the air. Ikuta stopped the enraged Major General with one hand, and continued the conversation:

「General Sir, Field Marshal Sir, it doesn't matter what you think, the commander of the unit of 8,000 men returning from the former eastern territories is me. You can blame Major General Saba if you want, but it will wiser to do so when there is more time to spare. After all, the situation is very dire.」

「… Are you serious, brat? You are just a First Lieutenant and not even twenty years old, and you want to talk to us as equals?」

「Equals? That's taking things too easy. I'm here to exact dominance.」

He cast aside his pretense of politeness, and said such fighting words. Without waiting for his opponents to accept it, he started off with a monologue:

「… From what I can tell, the coup isn't going well. Your priority target, Field Marshal Igsem, is standing well over there, and there have not been any edicts to legimitize your revolt. The Igsem faction is holding out in the 『Zalulu Hunger Castle』, and the Remeon faction has been spread thin to secure many bases, and can't break through with brute force. I conclude that you are at an impasse.」

He didn't hold back in voicing these irrefutable fact, which made General Remeon click his tongue. Ikuta observed their reactions as he continued:

「However, the Remeon faction still suppressed the bases in Central and blockade the roads. If the Igsem faction from other region can make it here, the Hunger Castle will be a force to reckon with. I think many chances were missed in the early stages to build up your advantage…」

The youth observed Field Marshal Igsem's face as he spoke. But the Field Marshal looked as if he was wearing a mask, with no discernible change in facial expression. It would be tough to garner information from this person, Ikuta smiled wryly in his heart.

「In any case, both sides lack the decisive trump card, that's why you are at a stalemate. It must be vexing for both of you, but this is great for me to interject from the outside.」

「… Which side will you align with? Since you have no intention of standing down, then you are aiming for an alliance?」

At this moment, General Remeon finally asked the crucial question. Ikuta was painfully aware of the two generals' piercing gaze as he shrugged with a vague smile:

「Hmm, I wonder which side should I join?」

「Stop hiding it!」

「No, I really haven't decided. This is a tough question. If you insist on forcing me to make a decision—」

The youth reach into his pocket with his right hand, and took out a silver coin before everyone:

「Let's use this to decide. Heads, I will join the Igsem, tails, I will follow the Remeon. What say you?」

「What—」 「……」

Under the watchful gaze of the two generals, Ikuta flipped the coin with his right thumb. The silver coin sprung into the air with a spin, and after exhausting its momentum about one metre in the air, it returned back to the youth's hand through the same path.

「… Okay, heads or tails?」

The youth caught the coin with the back of his hand, and slowly removed his left hand concealing the coin. When a glint of silver was showing, General Remeon shouted in a panic:

「Wait! Deciding like that is…!」

「Alright I will wait.」

Ikuta used his left hand that was covering the coin to grab and shove it into his pocket. The dark haired youth then said to the startled General Remeon with a devious smile:

「Didn't I tell you? I really don't plan on joining either side. I hope the both of you can worry together with me.」

After confusing his opponents with his flashy words and actions, the youth suddenly crossed his arms.

「Realistically speaking, completely suppressing the coup at this stage is nigh impossible. If you two have an all out battle until one side gives up, it is very likely that the Kioka will invade us. With our forces divided like this, we couldn't put up much of a resistance, and would definitely lose.」



「Don’t talk as if you know everything. It is impossible for you to grasp the entire situation since you have just returned to the Empire.」

「That’s right, there are still some things I need to confirm. I can deal with that later, let’s get back on topic. Everything has its time and place. Anyway, I think the silliest ending will be for us to test the limits of each other’s patience. It will be detrimental to both sides if Kioka launches an invasion, but the first one to compromise will be put on the back foot— while we are forced to a standstill, precious time is being wasted. Isn’t that our current situation?」

「……」

「Sigh, I think this is inevitable. The more urgent the goal that is set in the beginning, the harder it is to make adjustment during a crucial moment— well, let’s confirm this for now. The Remeon faction’s strategic goals in staging this coup are 『purging the corrupted nobles』, 『protect the Emperor』, followed by 『setting a de facto military government』, correct?」

「… That is correct. We want to save the Emperor from the hands of the villains in court, and form a new government with soldiers. I will personally listen to the will of the Emperor, which will stop the abuse of military deployment, and achieve grand strategic goals with proper policies.」

「I understand. In short, the reigning Emperor don’t have the wits to rule normally, and even if he miraculously regain his past intelligence, his administration ability after being separated from the cabinet would be zero, since his ministers are the ones who know how to execute his policies. Which means— if a military government is formed, then the Emperor will just be a powerless figurehead, right?」

「I don’t deny that. However, everyone knows that this is many times better than the Emperor becoming the puppet of the villains in

court. Since there isn't anyone to rule the country properly, then there is no choice other than the soldiers taking up this task.」

「I know what you mean… But realistically speaking, if you don't compromise on this point, it will be difficult to come to a consensus with the Igsem faction, correct?」

Ikuta turned his gaze from General Remeon to the fiery haired general as he said that.

「What are your views, Field Marshal Sir? Can you accept this military government?」

「Out of the question. That will be violating the separation of the military from the state.」

「I thought so too～」

The youth shrugged with an awkward smile. When he was about to grumble about his joking attitude, this situation suddenly felt strangely nostalgic to General Remeon.

— Calm down, Sol, Tel. Here, have some tea.

He remembered that man who would always mediate between them with a smile when their opinions clashes.

— Staying stubborn won't solve anything, let's take our time to find a compromise, okay?

The relaxed tone that would make anyone's shoulder ease up echoed in his ears… If Solvenares Igsem and Terushinha Remeon were water and oil, then that man was a magical spoon that could mix the two materials together. With him joining the discussion, they would always find a peaceful resolution, no matter how difficult the question might be.

「……」

Why did he recall that memory at this moment in time? General Remeon didn't understand either. The person before him didn't look anything like his friend from the past.

Neither his looks nor demeanour resembled him. Even if Field Marshal Igsem guaranteed his identity, General Remeon still had his doubts. He heard about the many feats Ikuta achieved as a member of the 「Knight Order」, but at this stage, he just thought of Ikuta as a rash youth interfering with affairs on the national level that was beyond his station.

「And now, I hope both of you can think about the line that you absolutely can't compromise on. Currently, the Emperor has been reduced to a puppet of the villains in court, who issue illogical order to the military. The Remeon faction can't accept this. In contrast, the Igsem faction won't permit soldiers to replace the traditional government formed by nobles, with the Emperor ruling in their place. So how about it? Your positions might seem completely different at first glance, but they might not be contradictory.」

But… Why is this brash youth doing this? Why is he trying to mediate between the imperial military that had split in two? And throw himself into this dangerous rift?

To fan the flames and collapse the nation? To form a independent faction amidst the chaos? To exploit the two forces that are at an impasse to maximize his gains…?

General Remeon didn't understand his true intentions. All of his guesses seemed plausible. Assuming he really was the son of Bada Sankrei, then in a sense, he had the right to wish for the demise of the Empire. It wouldn't be a surprise if he mourned his father's unjust death too much, and was using this chance to exact his revenge.

However, that wasn't true. Something deep within General Remeon, beyond his logical self was telling him this. It was a baseless gut feeling, but the General trusted his instinct even more as he watched the youth's action. The youth's desperate performance to look relaxed and jolly, while digging deep into his heart to formulate

words and display his oratory skills── the General couldn't help but see his figure overlapping with that of his late friend.

This youth was standing in this place with the same thinking as the old Bada Sankrei.

He was standing here In order to bridge the gulf that the despairing chasm between the Igsem and Remeon──

「Basically, I think the Remeon faction wants to return to the imperial army, that isn't privatized by the nobles. Even without establishing a military government, we can achieve this by restoring the authority of the Emperor over the military, and ensure the independence and pride of the military. If we cut the nobles off from interfering with grand military strategy, then they won't be able to privatize the army. Isn't that so, General Remeon?」

The sudden question directed his way snapped the General who was lost in his thoughts back to reality. He shook off the remnants of the past from his mind, and quickly organized the main gist of the topic.

「… But they might not be agreeable to this. Taking back the privatized army is an urgent task, but the Empire's governance needs major revision too. We need to establish a military government because the nobles can't be trusted with this. Furthermore, the military can't be formed independently. As you know, upkeeping an army requires a large budget. If we leave the treasury to the aristocrats who only spend money without making any, it is just a matter of time before the entire system is paralyzed.」

「It is natural for you to be concerned about this, but let's think of it in a more flexible way. All the changes are done in one go. We take back the Emperor from the corrupt nobles, and revert the privatized army back to normal── let's stop at that for now, and discuss the policy and governance problem at a later time. I understand the feeling of wanting to reach out and fix the problem, but the Igsem

faction can't accept that. For the sake of finding a compromise, we have to be patient sometimes.」

「You want me to consider doing this in stages? You think the Igsem faction will be agreeable to that?」

「It will be easy if they are agreeable, but that's unlikely. Since they know the goal of the Remeon faction is to establish a military government, then they have to intervened. Isn't that right, Field Marshal Sir?」

In response to Ikuta's query, the fiery haired general nodded with his eyes close to affirm that. When he saw that reaction, the youth returned his gaze back on General Remeon.

「Sigh, that's what I expected. But General Remeon, I hope you can listen without getting angry… Do you think the military government will succeed?」

「… What…?」

「Instead of leaving the governance to the nobles, it will be smoother if we did it ourselves— you probably think that way. It will be great if things were that simple, but I have my reservations. The essence of governance is to obtain funds from the people, make use of it, and let the money flow smoothly through the country— it involves the management of funds from the beginning to the end. It's hard to imagine that you will have the required knowledge of all this, since you have spent your entire career in the military, General Remeon.」

「So that's what you want to say… I know my shortcomings in governance, and will recruit consultants as needed, and had found the talents for this to some extent.」

「I will feel devastated if you didn't prepare that much before staging a coup… But the problem is even more basic. Frankly

speaking, I can predict the policy you will choose, and how you will fail.」

「… What?」

「Let me make a prediction. After establishing a military government, you will immediately impose strict economic control over the entire Empire, enforced by the might of the military. You will tax the nobles and merchants heavily in proportion to their wealth. To prevent the disproportionate distribution of resources, you will use a ration system, and heavily regulate commerce. Most of the taxes will be invested in the military to continue surveillance of the people, and an equal distribution of wealth.」

The General turned stiff. The youth hit the mark on all the policy that the General was thinking about implementing.

「… This is necessary measures during times of war. Is there anything wrong?」

「It's completely wrong. No one will be happy if everyone gets the same thing is the straightforward thinking of a military blockhead. While you are building up defences against our external enemies, your policies will create an even bigger enemy within the country. Even when powerful and influential people become your foes, you will stand firm in your sense of righteousness and charge on ahead without making compromises. In the end, the soldiers that used to be the guardians of the people will become a symbol of fear and hatred in less than a decade—」

「Don't make baseless and pessimistic predictions! The threat of the Kioka is growing by the minute, and allocating most of the budget to national defence is inevitable! Taxing the wealthy is the logical choice! Or are you saying I should exploit the peasants?」

「Please calm down and listen to me. If any wealth they gain will get taxed, the subject of these taxes will take one of three actions. Either hide their income, protest against the policy, or perform

shoddy work. You might prevent the first through absolute surveillance and suppressed the second through force, but you can't do anything about the third action. The government can't force the people who have lost their will to work. If you try to intimidate them to work by use of force, then that will just be slavery.」

「Do I look like a tyrant who will enact such foolish policies? The taxes will be maintained at a level that is bearable to the people!」

「You can't imagine how hard it is to judge that limit. There had been many military government established by soldiers with the noblest of intentions, but they all made the same mistake. Do you know what that means? All of them forced their standards of pain endurance onto the people. Silently enduring the harsh training of their superior, long marches during campaign, starvation because of late resupply and the fear of death looming on the battlefield— this is normal for soldiers who are used to it, and 『endurance』 is a merit to be lauded. When someone like that governs, they will naturally think that the people has a high tolerance for pain too. They will wrongly assume that the people will still have the drive to work despite the pain they had to endure in their daily lives. Even if that is far from reality, they will still hope that things will progress in that way. That is the biggest reason why military governance are always short lived.」

「—! You are saying I will follow in their footsteps!?」

「I think so. Even compared to other officers, your values are modelled too much around the standards of a soldier. It is exactly because you are an outstanding soldier, that I am confident you won't be a good governor. I will be frank, I think you will be a serious dictator that means to do good, but end up destroying the nation.」

Ikuta's words were beyond that of an admonishment, and the shocked General Remeon's jaw dropped. After stopping for a moment, the youth glanced at sideways at Field Marshal Igsem:

「Soldiers shall not interfere with politics. The Field Marshal's pet phrase includes such a warning… The qualities of a soldier doesn't intersect with that of governance. That is why we shouldn't cross the line separating the two.」

「……」

「Hence, I object to the establishment of a military government. Returning to the original topic, why do you think the Emperor became a puppet of the nobles?」

The two generals found it hard to answer this question which had unclear intentions. Ikuta paid them no mind and continued:

「I think, it's because the Emperor lives in the palace. If he keep staying in a place that had become the nest of corrupted nobles, even the noblest of man will fall in no time. However, if we think of it from another perspective, that means there won't be any problems if he didn't live in such an environment.」

「… W-What do you mean?」

「Simply put, I propose shifting the restricted residence to the central military base.」

The youth announced something so disrespectful with a cheerful voice. General Remeon aside, even the fiery haired general twitched his brows.

「The Igsem faction and Remeon faction will each provide half of his guards. He will be separated from the corrupt nobles, and with the Igsem faction keeping watch, the Emperor won't end up as a puppet of a military government. We can revert back to the times before the privatization of the military, there won't be any need for a major upheaval of the government body. This is the compromise agreeable to the gsem faction and the Remeon faction.」

「H-How is this different from establishing a military government with the support of the Emperor?」

「It's vastly different. This is just strengthening the security around the Emperor as public order deteriorates during times of war, and not going beyond the military's duty. We are just inviting the Emperor to govern from the new facilities inside the military base.」

「Aside from the restricted residence, the Banhataal palace have all the facilities needed for governance. There are also buildings with deep relations to the military, such as the Deep Green Hall and White Saint Hall… How should we make up for these when His Majesty governs from the base?」

「We can take care of them one at a time when they are needed. How many times does the Emperor hold an audience with others? Other than that sly fox, you don't get that many chances to meet him, right? Frankly speaking, you just need to prepare a bedroom and doctors in the base. The minor nobles not involved with corruption can form the new cabinet, they are the ones who do the actual work in the first place. His Majesty is in no state to administrate anyway.」

「Watch your tongue…! Even with this plan, it will be extremely disrespectful for us to decide to shift His Majesty's residence.」

「That's true. So the quickest way is to get his consent. If you want to convince His Majesty, don't you think now is a good chance, since all the naggy nobles are keeping quiet?」

Ikuta grinned from ear to ear. The two generals finally saw a path forward.

「Due to security concerns, we humbly request His Majesty to move his restricted residence to the base— this proposal is befitting for a soldier, since His Majesty's safety is our top priority. If the Emperor agrees to this, then the plan can proceed smoothly.」

「It is possible in theory… But will His Majesty accede to this…?」

「The sly fox will never agree. But there is a chance we can convince His Majesty with time. If His Majesty is too frail to listen, then we can conclude that he is in no state to fulfil his duties as the Emperor. We should then summon the priests to complete the troublesome procedures of making the First Prince the Regent. This should have been done a long time ago.」

Ikuta state his views fluently, and looked at the two people before him:

「Well then, the most important thing right now— who has the Emperor right now, and how is he being protected? How is the state of his health?」

The moment he tossed out this question, the air froze. Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon looked at each other, watching for any minute reaction. Their actions told the dark haired youth what the chilling answer was.

「… Huh…? No, wait… hold up. Could it be… neither of you found the Emperor…?」

Neither general answered. Unexpectedly, the youth was the one breaking out in cold sweat.

In this situation, hiding the Emperor was meaningless. In order to display their superiority, they should make full use of their bargaining chips. It was clear that neither of them had this chip in their hands.

「… The First Prince is under our protection.」

After a heavy silence, General Remeon said with a bitter face. For him, just showing this card was the limit of his advantage. He chose to share this information because he realized that the situation wasn't under the control of everyone present here.

「… I see…」

He wasn’t showing it on his face, but Ikuta was flustered. He realized that he was facing a very troublesome situation.

Considering his health recently, the Emperor couldn’t have escaped by himself. That means, right now— someone not from the Igsem or Remeon factions had abducted the person with the highest authority in this country.

「… If I can say that I did it, that will be the fastest way to settle this issue.」

Ikuta made a joke to escape reality, then sighed softly. He did so to clear his panic, and thought about the next step:

「I’m sorry, but let’s table our earlier discussion. Even if we come to a consensus, we can’t execute the plan if the Emperor is missing… To be honest, I even thought of a plan in the event of the Emperor’s death, but I didn’t expect him to go missing like this.」

The youth grumbled as he scratched his head… And contrary to the complicated words he said, the three of them understood the situation in a very simple way.

And that was— whoever secures the Emperor would have the initiative in this mess.

「So we will be starting from this point… Regrettably, my preferred method of talking instead of acting won’t be able to solve everything.」

After processing everything he knew about the situation and looking at the big picture, a chill ran down Ikuta’s spine.

The missing Emperor and the three factions striving for supremacy. This had gone from confusing to being an outright comedy. The youth was the one who interjected into this situation in the hope of keeping this stalemate, but he couldn’t shake the feeling that this was all the scheme of someone else. A malicious and sadistic will of someone manipulating the forces from the dark.

「…… sigh, let's start by exchanging information. Why don't we share everything we know about the Emperor before and after the coup?」

「……」「──」

「You are free to lie or hide anything, but the worst thing we all fear would be the Emperor remaining missing as time is wasted. I think we should be generous with our information.」

With that warning as the opening line, the three of them started probing each other in a suffocatingly tense atmosphere.

The meeting lasted five hours, and it was almost noon when it ended.

「……」

Torway who stayed by Ikuta's side all this time watched the youth hold an intense discussion with the two heads of the Imperial Military. He couldn't help feeling awed by the side of him holding his own against those two figures. He could see the minute changes to the youth that his father probably couldn't notice.

—Ik-kun…

He was sweating an awful lot, and it was clearly not from the warm weather. Just how much pressure was he under? After restarting the 「Rising Sun Regiment」, the burden on his shoulder had increased by an incredible amount.

「… Phew~」

As the youth watches on, they went through all the topics that they could discuss and shared everything they could— when everyone realized that, Ikuta raised a hand to wipe the sweat from his brows.

「Hmm, so that's all for today? We don't have all the clues, but we can make some deductions. Let's all work hard separately for now.」

He concluded with a mixture of sarcasm and sincerity, the youth gestured to Major General Saba beside him and started to withdraw. However, General Remeon was waiting for this moment and said:

「Wait, I have one other thing to add.」

「Hmm?」

「Why is First Lieutenant Torway Remeon over there? Is he being held hostage to threaten me?」

General Remeon showed incredible restrain to enquire about this matter that had been on his mind from the very beginning. If he showed concern over his son at the start, that would be showing his weakness to his enemy.

「That's just a waste of time. I have killed many of my comrades since I staged the coup. I don't intend to make my son the exception.」

The jade eyed general said as he suppressed his familial emotions. Torway understood his father's position and wasn't surprised that he had been cast aside. However, he couldn't keep his cool and lowered his gaze.

「Hmm～ does he look like a hostage? Like I said, he is my adjutant…」

Ikuta scratched his neck with a finger, and seemed to be in deep thought.

「Ehh, if you insist on going back, I will think about it… So what will you do, Torway?」

General Remeon furrowed his brows in surprise at this unexpected declaration. But Torway kept quiet and didn't move, so the general said to him:

「Come to me, Torway. You are the third son of the Remeon house. You should know where your place is.」

「……」

「Torway!」

The moment his father raised his voice, the youth raised his head and broke his silence.

「… I’m sorry father. I feel the same way as Major General Saba.」

「You are going with the nonsense that my future is bleak?」

「No…! No, I…!」

His chest was stuffed with wordless emotions, making Torway groan. The youth wasn’t good at expressing his feelings with words, or dismissing things with simple pleasantries.

General Remeon looked at his dumbstruck son with cold eyes of contempt:

「What’s the matter? Just speak your mind. You are going to become enemies with your father, don’t tell me you didn’t give it any thought.」

「……!」

「Answer me clearly, Torway. Why are you standing over there?」

With the face of this decisive question, Torway turned stiff, as if someone was gripping his heart. Seeing that his son was speechless with trembling shoulders, the jade eyed general let out a heavy sigh of disappointment.

「… So you were fooled by that boy without thinking about things through?」

After shooting a sideways glare at the dark haired youth, General Remeon turned a stern gaze to his son:

「Change your mind right now, don’t you feel ashamed about being so wilful? Everything you own is because you are born in the Remeon house, and the result of the highest standard of education paid by your family. Going elsewhere after reaping all the benefits, and even pointing your gun at me— no matter what you say, you will always be seen as an ingrate.」

「……!」

「And we are facing a national crisis… Not just you, no one can prioritize their preferred way of life. If you can't even see this truth, then look at the soldiers behind me. They are the real patriots. They have put the cause above their own lifes, and are fighting for the good of the people. You should be able to tell the difference in mentality—」

「Alright～ that's enough, that's enough.」

The General wanted to go on, but the dark haired youth interrupted shamelessly:

「I have been listening quietly, and you are so overbearing with all that talk about being ungrateful and national crisis. Is that how you try to convince your son? At least be aware of the time and place. Like I said, your values have been optimized too much to that of a soldier.」

「… You want to disturb the conversation between parent and child?」

「You have the cheek to call that a parent and child talk with that imposing attitude? This isn't a trial in court. You might be the perfect soldier, but the jury has decided unanimously that you are a failure as a father because of rule violations. Regrettably, you can't appeal against this judgement.」

Ikuta said without reservation, then reached for Torway from his horse and dragged over by the collar.

「Uwah?」

「Trying to convince someone by asking them to be selfless is a terrible choice. And not everyone will follow someone just because the things he said make sense. If you want to headhunt someone from my side, then you need to show how much you need that person.」

The dark haired youth rest his hand nimbly on Torway while seated on a horseback, and grinned from ear to ear:

「It is obvious that I think very highly of this guy. Specifically, I have delegated the gunners to his care. You might think this is a blessing because he is born as a Remeon— but other than his prowess on the battlefield, your son has an astonishing good point. Do you know what that is?」

「… I will humor you then. What is it」

「This fellow won't change and become jaded. It is surprising how much he stays the same.」

Ikuta's arm reached around the youth's shoulder, and pinched his cheek from the other side:

「As you already know, we suffered a lot during the unrest in the northern territories. Our supply lines and communication were unstable, and we had to fight bloody battles continuously. Staying in such an environment will wear down on the troop's mental state. They will not feel anything from killing the enemy, seeing corpse discarded at the roadside, or hesitate in using the corpse of a comrade that died before their eyes as a meat shield. You should know very well— the chilling sensation as your soul gets molded into the most ideal form as you spend your days in such constant strife.」

「… Yes. All soldiers grow and become veterans after experiencing such a time.」

「That's right. After going through that war, I have become more experienced, and can kill the enemy in the same way as carving a pumpkin— when I realized that, I felt for the first time that I was almost consumed by war. That was a horrible feeling, as if I was no longer myself…」

Torway felt the youth's body shivered a little right then.

「But when I look to the side, this guy didn't change at all. He will get sad when either friend or foe gets hurt, and will shiver in fear at the sight of danger. When I watch his reaction, I realized, 『Ah～ There's something wrong with me』, and held on to my sanity.

We barely avoided going mad after being sent constantly to the front lines in that horrible war, it was because he acted as our moral compass. You might think poorly of his timid mindset— but to me, it's the opposite. His righteous timidness has been saving me all this time.」

Torway wanted to look at the youth beside him with sincere surprise, but his stiff jaw stopped him from turning his head. Ikuta said without reservation to the jade eyed general:

「Do you understand? This isn't a metaphor, he is the conscience of our 『Knight Order』. I don't plan to give him up to someone who can't understand his value, be it his father or anyone else. In short— if you want your son back, then rinse your mind and stay woke, stubborn old man.」

Ikuta snorted his nose, then left with his subordinates with these parting words. As he watched his son leave with them, General Remeon wanted to call out to him again— but aside from making his point with the model standards of a soldier, he couldn't think of any other way to convince his son.

On their way back to camp after ending the long talks, Torway felt he should stop peeking from the side, and decided to speak up:

「…Ik-kun, about what happened earlier…」

「If you have any sympathies, then don't mock me. I know I made many subpar points.」

The dark haired youth cut him off and pouted bitterly:

「Like the reason why most military governments fail historically… no matter how low I set the bar, that is too simple of an explanation,

so purge that from your memory. I think of myself as a member of the scientific community, and not an expert on history. All that talk about military leaders demanding the citizens to endure are just baseless ramblings.」

「… Ah, you are talking about that? I-I see.」

「My methods aren't effective, but I want to plant seeds of doubts in General Remeon, and make him question his doings. After all, even someone unlearned like myself can be certain that your father's attempt at governance will end in painful failure… Sigh, this isn't an issue with his knowledge, but his personality. Be it negative or positive, he is too serious and kind to get involved with politics.」

Ikuta finished with a sigh, and his expression brightened a little.

「In any case, I think there still room for discussion after speaking with him. Compared to Field Marshal Igsem, it is much easier to reach a consensus. I will do my best to con him. If someone else can do it, so can I.」

「Yes, but if it's Ik-kun, my father will… Ah, that's not what I want to say…」

「Okay～let's hurry on back. The weather is getting bad, let's not dally, or we will get drenched!」

Ikuta pretended to be oblivious and cut Torway off, then spurred his horse forth. His horsemanship didn't improve at all. The youth chased steadily after his wobbling figure.

As the three factions returned to their base, it finally started to rain. Thunder rumbled above the heads of the soldiers, and forty seconds later, large drops of rain poured onto the dry earth.

「Phew～! I can breathe easy now.」

The torrential rain splattered against the roof. Relishing in his luck on hearing the rain from indoors, the seated Ikuta stretched his bare feet. He probably felt relaxed to be away from the eyes of the

soldiers. After changing out of his drenched clothes, he wore a casual piece of pants and shirt.

「Just how relaxed are you… This isn't your home, heck, this isn't even a base.」

Matthew said on behalf of the dozen or so officers in the large room. The room only had two long tables joined to gather with ten odd plain chairs around it. All the furniture was borrowed.

Their temporary base is a town in Miogaroki Province, situated to the southwest of the Yunakura province. More specifically, they had set up camp in the villages and town within a 10 km radius, with their forces spread out. It would be great if they could use a base, but the Remeon faction had occupied all of them. Their temporary headquarters were set up in the local community centre.

「No, you have to relax even if you have to force yourself, boy from the Tetzirich house. Because who knows when we will have the luxury of getting a roof, bed and three meals. Fuhahaha!」

After roughly drying his hair with a towel, Major General Saba laughed heartily. This was too different from the poker face he had some time ago, and the slightly pudgy youth wasn't sure how to react.

「As the Major General says, it is important to rest well when you have the chance. Matthew-san, have some tea.」

Haro eased the mood with a gentle smile and a teapot in hand, then poured tea for everyone. After taking a sip of the steaming tea, Major Sazarf sighed in relief:

「… I'm finally alive again. I don't want to experience such a fast march ever again.」

「I agree. After going for more than ten days, my legs are like lead…」

Major General Saba's adjutant, Major Melza concurred with an awkward smile. Everyone in the room thought back of their journey here when they heard that:

「— We will set general course for the Yunakura province military base. To avoid any stragglers from getting lost, spread this information to the entire regiment.」

Ikuta told the officers under his charge before setting off. They could imagine how grueling the march would be from these words.

「Basically, we will be traveling via the planned return route, so that part is simple. However, we will be moving at our maximum speed, so there would be units falling behind, but we won't wait for them. Don't panic when that happens, and just link up with them at the destination.」

With almost 10,000 men, just traveling was a difficult task. If everyone wants to return by the same route, the line would be tens of kilometres. And of course, the youth didn't wish for such an inefficient thing to happen.

His plan for the army was to 「march separately」. He'd break the large unit into temporary separate groups, send them on different routes with the goal of meeting up at the destination. The speed of entire group would be quicker, and it would ease the load on the supply points too.

But this method had its risk. It might just be for the duration of the march, but their forces would be separated. Traveling along deserted plains might be fine, but there was a good chance they might run into the Remeon faction's resistance along the way. They had to avoid the possibility of their forces being taken out in pieces.

To counter this, they should shorten the distance between each detachment and keep in frequent contact. But if the more thorough they did so, the slower they would move. It was the responsibility of the commander to find the compromise between speed and safety.

「We will send an advance force to the places where the Remeon faction are likely to set up defences, and to clear them by any means possible. My detachment will take care of this, so you all just need to focus on the march.」

Many of the officers looked uneasy and doubtful about the fact that Ikuta was the Regiment Commander over the more senior and experienced Major General Saba. The youth realized their worries and didn't looked them in the eyes head on, and took on the role with an easy attitude. I can handle this myself, so just watch from the sidelines— that was the message Ikuta's action was conveying.

「There might be ambushes along the way, so we will shorten the distance between each units. Even if you get attack, reinforcement can rush to you immediately. Don't worry, what I want to avoid is for everyone to slow your pace because of the fear of getting attacked.」

Ikuta swept his firm gaze across the faces of the officers:

「There should be many of you who aren't sure what to make of this coup. And I want to tell you— you can think about it after reaching the Empire. Be it following my cause, or offering up my head as a present to the Igsem or Remeon factions, all that is moot before we return to the Empire.」

His unexpected words made the soldiers gasp. Using this moment when they were taken aback, the dark haired youth announced:

「We will now march for the military base in Yunakura province of the Katjvarna Empire— all units, move out!」

The instinct branded into the souls of the soldiers made the officers salute on reflex. It was far from respect or trust, but all of them shared the common consensus that Ikuta was not to be taken lightly.

「— The march was so grueling that I thought I would die, but we managed to pull through. Most of the stragglers had reached today…

But Colonel Tetzirich looked astonished when we passed through the Yunakura province.」

「Anyone would be shocked by that…」

At the mention of his father's name, Matthew crossed his arms and sigh— Ikuta explained the entire situation to Colonel Mirtog Tetzirich, who was the commander of the standing regiment in the Yunakura province, and asked him to continue to stay in this province. Someone still needed to look after the Shinaak tribe.

The colonel said 「I want my son to stay with me」, but Matthew was adamant in his refusal. After getting the entire Tetzirich dragged into this mess, his feelings as a son was complicated.

「But after returning to the Empire, we have some deserters from the main forces…」

「That's right, we have about 200 deserters. That's four platoons and some individuals… It's vexing, but that is considered a small number.」

Major Melza said in a worried tone. Sazarf quickly changed the topic:

「Sigh～ but in any case, we have finally 『caught up』, right? We managed to put ourselves into the picture while the Igsem and Remeon factions were at an impasse. That's a crucial milestone, right, Regimental Commander Sir?」

「Haro, I want tea～」

「You are ignoring me?」

「The Major Sazarf I know will always be my superior officer, and will never call me Regimental Commander Sir～」

「That will confuse the troops! What do you expect me to do at the frontlines!?」

As the group cracked jokes that didn't fit the time and place, Princess Chamille appeared after changing her clothes. She walked

straight to Ikuta who was chatting cheerfully, and sat down beside him:

「Don’t tease the Major too much, Solork. Like usual, you missed the chance to stop.」

「That is correct. Okay, it seems that eased everyone’s fatigue, so let’s stop the small break. Please take a seat.」

He stopped his relaxed attitude and announced in the forceful tone of the commander of the 「Rising Sun Regiment」. The officers immediately sat down and waited for the young Regimental Commander to continue.

「There isn’t much time, so I will skip the jokes and get straight to the serious discussion— gentlemen, which is more important, ass or tits?」

「What are you saying with such a serious tone!?」

The Princess smacked the youth’s back loudly. In contrast to the members of the Knight Order and Sazarf who had a silly smile, Major General Saba and his staff officers were stunned.

「That’s the kind of guy he is… Trying to change him for the better is a waste of time, so please get used to this.」

Matthew said with a sigh. When he heard that, Ikuta looked at his friend with a brilliant smile:

「Thank you, my dear Matthew. By the way, you are definitely an ass man.」

「I’m speaking up for you here, don’t return kindness with ingratitude! Don’t forget there are ladies present!」

「Hmm, speaking of which, I am an ass man too. The bigger ones are great, fuhaha!」

「Don’t join in too, Major General! If we keep chatting about vulgar topics, the sky will turn dark!」

Unable to stand the meeting starting off on such a relaxed mood, Matthew and Princess Chamille tried to get it back on track. The reserved Haro and Torway couldn't stop the havoc, and Sazarf would occasionally join in the fun. With Yatori gone, the two of them had to put a brake on things.

「No, Your Highness, this is relevant to our discussion. I intend to use them as easy to understand metaphor. The Igsem faction are tits, and the Remeon faction is ass.」

「Are you trying to taunt the two factions?」

「Oh～ Regimental Commander Sir, what are we then?」

「Good question, my eternal superior officer. As the mediator of these two factions, we need a symbol that include both tits and ass. The overwhelming love that encompass all, and that is— a matured women!」

「That's just your fetish!」

A second slap exploded on the youth's back. The Princess' palm was getting numb, and before she struck for the third time, Ikuta forcefully changed the topic:

「That hurts… Hmm～ can't be helped～ since someone don't like metaphors, I will just use the direct terms then.」

「You should have done that from the start… And so? How did the meeting go?」

「Well, the situation is very difficult. Simply put, the Emperor is missing.」

The mood in the room turned rowdy. Ikuta continued nonchalantly:

「The Remeon faction failed to secure the Emperor at the start of the coup, and the Igsem faction didn't have him either. Right now, we don't even know where he is.」

「M-Missing… But I heard His Majesty can't even get up from bed?」

「Yes, so he didn't escape on his own, or even did so out of his own will. The proof is that Chancellor Trisnai Izanma is missing too.」

When he heard that name, Major General Saba's face turned stiff:

「… That damn sly fox, he kidnapped the Emperor.」

「That's right. To General Remeon, that man is the first target he wants to purge. Up until the staging of the coup, the General must have kept a tight watch on the Chancellor's whereabouts. And he still managed to slip away—」

「This is no coincidence… it's very possible that he made his move before the General did.」

Major Melza states her cautious view, and Ikuta nodded without hesitation:

「That's correct. That fox must have noticed that a coup was going to happen. I don't know how he caught wind of it, but that is the only way it make sense. General Remeon had surrounded Banhataal when the coup begun, so it will be almost impossible to escape the capital by then. This is my deduction— Trisnai probably left the capital with the Emperor before the coup happened.」

「Ughh… on the other hand, is there any chance they are still in the capital? Banhataal is the largest city in the Empire, and there are plenty of places to hide. He might have other helpers.」

「If they are hiding in the capital, General Remeon would have uncovered them by brute force of numbers. And it isn't just that fox, he also have a bedridden Emperor. They would need a lot of supplies, so people will come and go frequently, even more so if he has collaborators. It's hard to imagine them hiding for so long.」

After answering Sazarf's question, Ikuta gave his deduction:

「Assuming Trisnai has the chance to escape out of Banhataal with the Emperor, the most possible time would be before the coup. Many nobles live in the palace, so cargo wagons comes and goes frequently. There are many ways to flee in secret.」

「… That's right. The security of the palace does a strict inspection of cargo going in, but doesn't pay much attention to cargo going out. It's not too difficult to smuggle two people out.」

Princess Chamille who lived there before supported Ikuta's deduction. At this point, Haro had a question and raised her hand.

「But… if they ran away, then His Majesty and the Chancellor would be gone. Since General Remeon was keeping an eye on them, then why didn't he notice?」

「They probably used body doubles. And since the Emperor is bedridden, so just a body double for Trisnai would be enough. It wouldn't be strange for that fox to prepare a certain number of body double on hand.」

The memories of meeting the Chancellor during Lieutenant General Safida's court martial was still fresh on Sazarf's mind, giving him the chill. They only spoke briefly, but Trisnai's gaze that was like a bone sucking leech left a deep impression on him.

「How they escape isn't important. It's about where they are hiding.」

With the discussion on the escape method over, Matthew pushed the next agenda forward. Ikuta nodded and continued the meeting.

「That's correct, we should focus on that. Regrettably, we don't have much clues. Even if we want to search the palace and capital, the Remeon faction has taken over the place and is hoarding all the intel.」

「Yes… Assuming your deductions are on point, then we can track them by searching the list of wagons that visited the palace recently. Father… General Remeon must have realized that.」

Torway broke his silence for the first time. The dark haired youth put both hands behind his head and looked up:

「Even so, I wonder how much their investigation could take them. After going through the central market, it will be impossible to determine which merchants shipped which cargo to which place. The Empire's transportation network from central to the surrounding areas is like a literally web.」

「Hey… so what do we do? Our plan to search for the Emperor is thwarted before we even start?」

Ikuta shook his head with a faint smile at the frustrated Sazarf:

「Don't be so tense, let's work fighting out of this checkmate and go for the win. Since we don't know where he fled to, then attacking from different angles is also a way. But even so— what's Trisnai's goal in fleeing with the Emperor?」

Ikuta raised a new question, but the others couldn't see the point and looked puzzled.

「His goal… He knew a coup is going to happen, so he ran. If not, the Remeon faction will kill him.」

「… No wait, Ma-kun. Now that Ik-kun mentioned it, something seems off.」

Torway noticed something was amiss and interjected. The officers focus their gaze on the jade eyed youth.

「If Trisnai is just fleeing for self preservation, then the situation wouldn't develop like this. He just needs to run to the Igsem faction to do that. After telling everything he knows to the Igsem, he can side with the Field Marshal and beat off the coup. There is no need to hide like this.」

「Yes, that’s what felt off to me. That fox knew that the coup was coming, and didn’t try to stop it. Seeking refuge with the Igsem faction was the safest route, but he chose not to do so. Can anyone explain why?」

When the youth opened the question to the floor, Major Melza raised her hand hesitantly:

「This might sound awful but… maybe he is considering the possibility of deserting the country? For example, the Chancellor felt pessimistic about the future of the Empire when he learned of the coup, and decided to exile himself and the Emperor…」

「Your opinion makes a lot of sense, pretty face. Why don’t we discuss this in my room alone tonight?」

「Hmm? Hmm? Seems like it’s my time to stage a coup, huh?」

「Major Sazarf, your eyes! Your eyes are scary!」

Matthew tried desperately to restain his superior officer who was ready to stand up. After this interlude that was the norm now, the dark haired youth got back on topic:

「The self exile Major Melza mention is plausible. Bringing the Emperor with him will make sense as a gift to the Kioka. It makes sense in that way.」

「That’s true. Offering the Emperor as a gift sounds like something a desperate politician would do.」

「That’s correct, my dear Matthew. But practically speaking, escaping overseas isn’t as easy as moving within the country. After the campaign to the Hiored Ore Mines, we have strengthened the securities at the borders as a countermeasure against spies. Like our earlier battle… we ran into many problems, but the Kioka is more reactive instead of proactive. That means Naval Commander Kanron who had infiltrated the Navy High Command— that phantom didn’t manage to relay the intel back to his home country.」

「It is very difficult to leave the Empire in this situation… But it is not impossible, right? It might be possible to overcome this if he made prior arrangements.」

「Sigh, that's right. If that fox found collaborators within the Remeon faction and the Navy, then it might be possible. Or maybe he abandoned his escape overseas midway and went into hiding. In that case… Instead of fleeing by land, escaping by sea would be more practical. Let's check all the routes that leads to the ports.」

After Ikuta said that, the officers penned it down on their notebooks. Matthew who was also writing said suddenly:

「… This might sound negative, but what happens if we don't find His Majesty? Even the Remeon faction who has the First Prince can't coronate him without confirming the safety of the Emperor, correct?」

「Yes. Pushing the Prince onto the throne without going through the proper procedure is as good as declaring that their actions lack legitimity. It is possible for the Prince to rule as the regent during His Majesty's absence, but I remember the condition is—」

「『More than half of the cabinet to acknowledge this proposal』. But the Remeon faction had purged— killed the cabinet members during the coup, and dead men can't give their consent. A new cabinet will need to be formed, but only the Emperor has the authority to do so. Simply put, they are caught in a loop.」

The officers groaned after hearing what Princess Chamille said. According to the Imperial Law, with the Emperor missing, it was useless for the Remeon faction to hold the First Prince in custody.

「It remains to be seen what the Remeon faction will decide in the end. They might force the issue with no regards to protocol… But given General Remeon's character, he won't make such a futile move. With the time limit of the Kioka invasion looming, I want to find a compromise through negotiations.」

Torway's face brightened a little. The youth could tell that Ikuta wasn't just being optimistic, and was predicting what General Remeon would do based on his personality.

「And of course, it will be the best for us to secure the Emperor. That means we will have the advantage during negotiations, but it's not a necessary condition to stop the coup. Please be clear about that. We want to find the Emperor for the sake of stopping the war, so it is pointless to start a fight over the Emperor. To me, it's fine if the Emperor is really gone.」

The youth said with a shrug… After learning that the Emperor was missing, he had re-evaluated what might happen in the future. What happens if the Igsem faction secured the Emperor, or the Remeon faction got hold of His Majesty, or when his faction finds the Emperor── Even if Matthew's worry that 「if we don't find His Majesty」 was to happen, there was still room for discussion. There were pros and cons for each scenario, and the youth searched for the best action to take in each event.

The problem was the process of searching for the Emperor, clashes would be inevitable when their search zones overlaps with another faction. However, they had to avoid major battles that would lead to many casualties. For Ikuta and the others whose goal was to mediate for the coup, this was more important than finding the Emperor.

「Sigh, Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon can differentiate right from wrong, and won't do anything childish like children fighting over snacks. But they aren't people who will hesitate during crucial moments. Also… like that time during the northern unrest, the frontline commanders and soldiers might act out of line. If that happens, we will be the force of intimidation that will keep the three factions in check──」

「「「「「「「Imperial Edict!」」」」」」」

Several perfectly in sync voices that came from all over the room cut Ikuta off. The soldiers around the table looked startledly to their pouches. When they saw their Sprites speaking with hollow eyes, they realized what this situation meant.

「This is a Jewel Voice Broadcast…」「How can this be!」「Are you kidding me, we haven't found the Emperor yet—」

Unable to stand this unsightly scene, Major General Saba slammed his palm onto the table:

「Don't panic, you noobs! Listen quietly!」

That roar that was like a punch to their brain made everyone from the Knight Order members to his adjutant Major Melza shut up. After the Major General forcefully restored order, the soldiers listened carefully.

「「「「「「— On the request of the Katjvarna Emperor Arshankrut Kitra Katjvanmaninik, Chancellor Trisnai Izanma hereby announce the following edict. It is regrettable, but I am on my deathbed during this national crisis. Before the flame of my life extinguishes, I want to pass my will onto the next generation—」」」」」」

As the voices continued, Princess Chamille's eyes turned sharper. The Sprites carried on:

「「「「「「— I will be holding a royal conference. In the province of the Empire's past glory, a place that befits its 900 odd years of history, I will be waiting for my noble blood kin to gather. Absentees will lose the right to inherit my will. Hurry on over, hurry on over, hurry on over—」」」」」」

After concluding the edict by repeating the last sentence stubbornly, the Sprites spoke no more. A deep silence fell on them, and the soldiers couldn't comprehend what was the meaning behind that edict.

「……Royal conference… It's that thing, right… Before the new Emperor is coronated, all the royals are summoned to discuss all sorts of things…」

Matthew mutterly baffledly. Major Melza nodded with the same expression.

「… That's right. It is formally a conference chaired by the reigning Emperor to decide who will succeed him. However, the line of succession won't change at the last moment, so this is just a procedure to formally acknowledge the authority of the next Emperor— and is more of a ceremony of the courts…」

「I don't know anything about the courts… But is that something that must be held now?」

Sazarf looked confused as he asked that. The Princess shook her head with a stiff face.

「No, it's the opposite. That man did such a thing because the country is divided right now.」

「That guy…? No, who is the one who sent this edict? The Igsem faction? Or the Remeon faction? This is ridiculous! Going by our earlier deductions, whichever camp gets the Emperor will issue an edict to legitimize their own faction—」

「No, Matthew. The Emperor is still missing… This edict is issued by Trisnai who is still in hiding.」

Ikuta told him with a bitter face. The slightly plump youth's confusion reached its peak.

「But why!? It is one thing to seek the protection of the Igsem faction, but why gather the royals under the guise of hosting a Royal conference!?」

「I don't know what that fox is thinking, but that Jewel Voice Broadcast has determined what will happen in the future.」

Ikuta ground his teeth loudly. With everyone's eyes on him, the dark haired youth explained:

「…In the province of the Empire's past glory, a place that befits its 900 odd years of history, I will be waiting for my noble blood kin to gather. The words are cryptic, but it is not in code. 『Province of the Empire's past glory』 probably refer to the old restricted residence in the Dafuma Province to the south, before it was shifted to Banhataal. I don't know where 『a place that befits its 900 odd years of history』 refers to, but there are a few possible places such as the former capital Lachzenka city comes to mind. Anyway, I'm hiding somewhere in the Dafuma Province, so bring a royal to me— that's the gist of the message.」

「So Trisnai is seeking aid…? But the Remeon faction will receive the message, so it will be a matter of luck on which faction will reach him first?」

「That's right, there is no telling what the results will be, the process has been decided— the Igsem faction and Remeon faction will send the majority of their forces to the Dafuma Province.」

Ikuta slammed his fist onto the table. Realizing what that meant, Torway opened his eyes wide:

「… Could it be… Trisnai is encouraging the two forces clash with that edict…?」

「Encouraging? It's not that simple, this is pouring oil onto the fire! Once they learn that the Emperor is in the Dafuma Province, Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon had to send troops over! If they search the same area, clashes are unavoidable…!」

「H-Has that Chancellor gone mad…? That will just make matters worse!」

Sazarf's yell made everyone gulp. The word 「Illogical」 flashed across their minds.

「…『Absentees will lose the right to inherit my will』, so any royals who isn't present for the Royal conference will be stripped of their succession rights. Conversely, by stopping others from attending, royals further down the line of succession can take the throne— that's what the edict was implying.」

The Princess said in a tone without any warmth. Major General Saba nodded sternly:

「I see, he is encouraging the royals into a power struggle… No, he is accelerating the adversity between the factions protecting the royals. And now, we have fallen into the torrent of power struggle, since we have the Third Princess with us…」

Major General stopped mid sentence. As an imperial soldier, he was hesitant to finish his words.

When everyone had stopped speaking, Haro raised her hand and butted in:

「… Regarding the Jewel Voice Broadcast earlier… Could it be a diversion? Maybe His Majesty and the Chancellor aren't in the Dafuma Province, and will attempt to escape overseas when we focus our efforts over there…」

「That is possible… But the authenticity is the problem. In order to legitimize their army, Field Marshal Igsem and General Remeon had no choice but to obey the edict. And we can't sit by idly.」

「… Yes, that can't be helped. We came here to stop the fight between the two forces.」

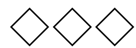
The Princess' words made the soldiers remember their original goal. Ikuta nodded firmly and told everyone:

「Form a detachment unit to march for Dafuma Province. Major General Saba will run the show here, I will command the detachment. Major General, I will need you to house sit, will that be fine?」

「I have no objections. I just need 5,000 men.」

「I will be counting on you. Torway, Matthew, Haro– You and your units will follow me. Princess, you have to accompany us, of course.」

The four named person stood up as one. Now that the meeting was over, they spent very little time seated in their chairs. Without having any time to rest from their long journey, they started moving on to their next destination.



At the same time, in the sixth floor commander's office of the 「Zalulu Hunger Castle」. The moment the Jewel Voice Broadcast ended, Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem issued his orders to the officers in the room:

「Form search teams immediately. Honorary General Yorunzaf Igsem and Brevet Lieutenant Colonel Yatorishino Igsem, head for the Dafuma Province with 3,000 cavalry to search for His Majesty. I will inform you on the details of the unit roster in five minutes.」

「Right.」 「Yes Sir!」

「Avoid unnecessary skirmishes on your way there. We have allies garrisoned in the base of that province, try your best to link up with them. Then use the advantage in numbers to search for the Emperor.」

Field Marshal ordered plainly with a serious tone. General Yorunzaf said with an intrigued voice:

「I wish to differentiate which type of battles are unnecessary.」

「One, you are permitted to strike back when attacked; Two, your goal is limited to maintaining or widening your search area, and you are allowed to attack preemptively to keep the enemy at bay. Three, after confirming the location of His Majesty, you are allowed to use all forces necessary to protect him.」

The Field Marshal answered immediately. The fiery haired general showed a violent smile:

「I understand very very clearly— Let us be off. Hurry with the preparations, Yatorishino.」

With that as a signal, the two Igsem left the room together.

As they walked down the stairs, the General said to Yatori who was walking beside him:

「Fuhaha! Did you hear that? Holding a Royal conference in such a situation? That edict is just trying to worsen the situation. I heard the rumours, but it seems a malicious fox had gotten hold of the Emperor.」

General Yorunzaf laughed off the dire state of the situation, and his arrogant attitude seemed somewhat reliable. Seeing that her grand uncle was the same as usual, Yatori answered calmly:

「… As the search area is limited to the Dafuma Province, clashing with the Remeon faction will be inevitable. We need to be careful with our actions, but what are the plans of the General?」

「We have the advantage in a treasure hunt, since 70% of the Dafuma Province is open plains. Be it in a search or a fight, we won't lose to the thin and pale fools from the Remeon faction.」

「Our cavalry has the advantage of terrain. But this time, the Remeon wind gunners will use a new weapon that didn't exist when you are still in active service. Please be careful of that.」

「You mean the Air Rifles? My men tore apart the a sample and took a look, it is very delicate for a toy. The bullet trajectory is stable, and it is very accurate from long range. They won't need to form ranks to fire volleys anymore. No wonder that Terushinha brat is getting so cocky.」

He remarked casually, but his thoughts got right to the point. He had retired from active duty for a long time, but the old general had a clear idea about the threat posed by the Air Rifles.

「When we fight them, we will have to change our usual methods of keeping our distance a little… Well, we will get used to it after fighting one time. Speaking of which, fighting a new type of weapons huh. I am getting hot blooded despite my advanced age.」

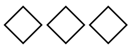
Seeing the old general swinging his right arm in anticipation of battle, the vermillion haired girl realized that her worries were unnecessary. General Yorunzaf wasn't someone who would get rusty from retirement.

The two of them went down to the third floor, and stepped up to the window to save some time.

「You seemed really happy, Grand Uncle.」

「Of course. Be it now or in the past, there's nothing enjoyable than the thrill of war.」

The two Igsem joked with each other and leaped out of the window as if it was the most natural thing in the world.



When he heard the sudden Jewel Voice Broadcast, hatred and murderous intent towards Trisnai Izanma surged up in General Remeon's heart, but he didn't lose his composure again.

He took two deep breath to ease the strong emotions in his heart, faced his staff officers in the conference room again, and they focused their gazes on him. They had all fallen into deep confusion, and needed the leadership of the jade eyed general.

「『The province of the Empire's past glory』… thinking about it forwardly, it's the Dafuma Province in the south, right? What's the situation with the military base there?」

「It's the territory of the Igsem faction, with 2,000 troops garrisoned there. Considering its decision from here, so it wasn't our suppression target.」

Lieutenant Colonel Lucika stated the facts calmly. Her calmness was invaluable to the General at this very moment.

「With this Jewel Voice Broadcast as the cue, the local forces might have already started their search. But there is no telling whether His Majesty is really in the Dafuma Province. This might be a diversion by Trisnai— or maybe a malicious prank.」

「Even so, the edict is still a fact. We have to act, however—」

After surveying the faces of the subordinates around him, General Remeon crossed his arms in deep thought:

「— I can't leave here. And so… Who will lead the search team?」

The officers gulped. This was a difficult choice to make. It wasn't just arriving at the destination and start searching for the Emperor, they also need to be ready for battle during the process, and negotiate for a more advantageous position. They had to avoid conflict, but not appear weak to the enemy, and find the Emperor swiftly and protect him— aside from an outstanding eye for strategy, they would also need to make nimble political maneuvers.

「I will go.」

Lieutenant Colonel Lucika broke the silence, and the General turned towards her in surprise.

「Battling and searching at the same time, and multitasking the search with negotiations— I feel I'm more suited to such a war that involves so many tedious details. I should be able to produce good results.」



「You? No, but… I'm not doubting your abilities…」

The jade eyed general said vaguely. When she saw him like this, his long time adjutant smiled deviously:

「Ara, do you feel that uneasy about me leaving the main base?」

Her taunting words made General Remeon raised the corners of his lips in an awkward smile. No matter what the truth might be, the commander-in-chief of an army couldn't say yes to that question.

Realizing the responsibility on his shoulders, he shook his head:

「Don't look down on me, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika. I have outgrown the need for a nanny.」

「I feel slightly more at ease after hearing you say that. Just a little.」

「You are as sassy as ever…」

Giving up on his rebuttal, the General shrugged. No matter how much of a front he puts up, he couldn't hide his true self from her. After all, he just lost his composure before her recently:

「I understand, I will leave the search for His Majesty to you. But I have a condition.」

「And what might that be?」

「Return to me safely. It won't be fair for this to go on. While we are still on active duty, I want to see you panic at least once.」

When she heard him say that, the 「Ice Lady」 didn't even twitch a brow as she saluted in a perfect motion. Only God and her knew whether the clumsy concern of the jade eyed general reached her.

Chapter 3

Fierce General Yorunzaf

The fastest way to reach the Dafuma Province in the south from the center of the Empire, was by using the main road. However, the Remeon faction had blockaded the main roads when they staged the coup. Hence, the search teams led by General Yorunzaf for the Igsem faction, and Ikuta for the 「Rising Sun Regiment」 had to deal with this obstacle first.

「Send word to the Hunger Castle— At 5pm today, our faction will send a detachment of 3,000 men towards the Dafuma Province. Ikuta Sankrei will be commanding this unit personally.」

Ikuta gave the order before setting off, which confused the other members of the Knight Order:

「Hey, why are we telling them this? Having the lead will be advantageous for our search in the Dafuma Province. Considering what will happen in the future, shouldn't we try to conceal our numbers and plans?」

「Don't panic and listen, Matthew. Forget about having the lead, we can't do anything before reaching the Dafuma Province. Before considering the search, we have to think about getting past the Remeon blockade.」

「That might be so, but how is this two issues related… Hmm? Ah, I see! You want to work together with the Igsem faction for the march there!」

「That's it. The road had been blockaded, but that's to prevent Igsem forces in other regions from coming in. They probably didn't think they would need to stop a large unit from leaving. If we have enough numbers, we can break through the blockade.」

Matthew nodded, and Torway showed an enlightened face:

「Our goal coincides with the Igsem faction. If they advance together with us, our numbers would be above 5,000. The Remeon unit blockading the road might be rather big, but they won't be able to stop such a large army.」

「That's correct. When the Remeon faction has the upper hand, we will side with the Igsem faction to restore balance. We will do the opposite if need be. That's our basic game plan.」

「The Three Kingdom strategy, huh… That was on the test for national stratagem.」
<TL: 三分の計 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Longzhong_Plan

「National stratagem? We have made it big without even realizing it…!」

Haro's casual comment made everyone laugh.

「… There's a limit to simplifying things. You are summarizing all this with just a 『made it big』?」

「Ahahaha…! Instead of putting up a stiff front, it's better to face the situation with a relaxed attitude. Hey, Yatori-san thinks so—」

Torway's careless words silenced the room, and the youth turned stiff after realizing he had misspoke. What he said made that missing piece everyone was averting their eyes from that much more prominent.

No one could ease the mood. Once they realized the gaping void before them, it was futile to ignore it. So they pretend to not notice, and didn't plan to touch on it. Even though they knew this was like walking on thin wire, and couldn't last for long.

「… Let's confirm our route. Everyone, please open your maps.」

Trying to hide it would just make things more miserable. Because he understood that, Ikuta didn't try to lighten the mood with a joke, and just change the topic matter of factly. Even he couldn't think of any other way.

She isn’t here— Afraid of facing this fact, the members of the Knight Order couldn’t accurately understand the how serious that was.

Yorunzaf Igsem who was in charge of the Igsem faction’s search team immediately understood the intentions of the message sent by the 「Rising Sun Regiment」. He could tell their interests were aligned, and arranged for his unit to match their advance. Shortly after setting off, he 「linked up」 with Ikuta’s group at a distance where they could see each other.

This was the very definition of adversity makes strange bedfellows, and the atmosphere between the two groups were more hostile than friendly. Their just happen to share a common goal for now, and would be at each other’s throat once the circumstances change— even the rank and file understood their relationship. <TL: 呉越同舟 https://www.nihongomaster.com/dictionary/entry/25588/goetsudoushuu >

As the blood-like color of dusk slowly dyed the evening sky, General Yorunzaf cheerfully said to Yatori besides him:

「Hey, the commander of that group ain’t too bad, and is rather thick skinned. He’s called Ikuta Sankrei? Seems to be a young brat, what kind of guy is he?」

「It’s hard to describe with just a sentence, but please don’t take him lightly. If there are any openings, he will turn the entire situation on its head, that’s the kind of person he is.」

「Oh～ You think that highly of him… What about in battle? Is he a quick witted strategist, or proficient in front line command?」

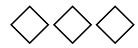
「He can play either roles competently, but he doesn’t like to fight by nature. Instead of anniliating the enemy in a crushing defeat, he prefers to win without either sides suffering any losses. You probably wouldn’t like him.」

「Hmmp, how dull. But I'm not a mad dog that couldn't tell right from wrong, and this is a civil war. If they don't want to fight, that's all the more better.」

The general showed restrain in his words, but he couldn't hide the displeasure in his brows. There was no point in admonishing him, since Yorunzaf's craving for battle is his nature.

「Sigh, let's march hand in hand lovingly for now. Things won't be so peaceful when we reach the Dafuma Province— let's hope everything will end swiftly and peacefully.」

With a faint smile that contradicts his words, General Yorunzaf tugged the reins with his lone arm.



When the Igsem faction and 「Rising Sun Regiment」 search teams head down the southern road, the Remeon unit back away temporary and allowed them to pass. Or rather, they had no other choice, the difference in numbers were too great for them to attempt any resistance. Even if that was possible, no one was stupid enough to make the mistake of having the forces to clash here.

「Quickly! Time is of the essence!」

In charge of all the forces they could mobilize while maintaining their hold on central— a search team of 7000, the Remeon faction's chief of staff Lieutenant Colonel Lucika headed south.

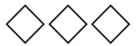
There was a road connecting the capital Banhataal to the central military base, and the Remeon faction had control of these places, allowing them to set off faster at this stage. Thanks to that, they had a 40km lead over Ikuta's unit.

「… If we want to advance without clashing with the other forces, the only way is to cut off the traffic. So we will destroy all the bridge along our path.」

Lieutenant Colonel Lucika ordered the unit blockading the road to let the search team from the other factions to pass through, but that didn't mean she had given up on harassing her opponents. She was in front of them and traveling on the same route, so she could obstruct them given enough time and manpower— simply put, creating obstacles. Destroying bridges were the basics of the basics.

「… That might be so, but we can only focus on the bridges on the main roads. We don't have the time to destroy all bridges leading to the Dafuma Province, and that will cut off our return route too. With that in mind, we can stall for around three days.」

It's enough to force the other search teams to take the long detour— that's what the 「Ice Lady」 thought. The faster they reach the Dafuma Province, the better her camp's position in finding the Emperor. This was a big advantage, by seizing the key areas in the Province, they could hold onto their wide search zone even after the other forces arrive.



「Hmm, we are almost at the river. We will head west from here.」

On the fourth day of the march, Ikuta who was the commander-in-chief ordered the 「Rising Sun Regiment」 search team to change directions. The girl in light armor who was in charge of Princess Chamille's escort team tilted her head puzzledly:

「The west? I think we should continue straight towards the south to reach the Dafuma Province.」

「That won't work. We will hit the Taburan river soon, and since the Remeon faction took the same route, they must have destroyed the bridges along the way. Instead of diverting in disappointment after seeing that, it is better to make the detour ahead of time.」

The dark haired youth explained to Warrant Officer Lucanti as he looked east with his telescope. He could see the advance party of the

Igsem search team keeping pace with his unit, while maintaining a fixed distance away.

Their tension remained despite the distance between them, but the other group didn't have any objection with changing directions, and headed west too.

「We don't even need to send out messengers. With Yatori with them, we can understand each other easily.」

The Igsem faction's cavalry unit was led by the vermillion haired girl. They could only look at her from afar, they had confirmed her presence three days ago. The members of the Knight Order could breathe easy for now, after seeing that Yatori was safe.

The youth sound delighted whenever he mentioned her. When she hears that, Princess Chamille beside him would feel a pain in her chest. However— the girl didn't show such emotions as she said:

「Working together with the Igsem and force the Remeon faction to surrender— is that possible?」

「If you are referring to a ceasefire, that won't be possible before the Emperor is located. As long as one of the faction had the possibility of 『winning』, it is impossible to settle on a compromise.」

「In that case, the faction with the Emperor will win this coup?」

「It's not that simple. Sigh～ the side that gets legimitized through an edict would become the『official army』, and would gain the upper hand in morale. On the contrary, the faction branded as 『rebels』 would lose the support of the masses, and their morale would plummet. That would be a critical blow to the conservative Igsem faction, and the Remeon faction would lose the means of erecting a military government. Simply put, it would determine which side had to make the compromise in the next ceasefire negotiations.

「… Which side do you plan on giving the honor too?」

「This isn't the result I'm hoping for, but if we can't protect the Emperor ourselves, I hope the Remeon faction gets hold of him. The only thing that could stop the Igsem is the authority of the Emperor. If I have to choose one of them, I will prefer the Remeon faction that is easier to deal with.」

「Hmm? I understand what you mean… But why didn't we…」

Form an alliance with the Remeon faction to stop the Igsem faction—? It was on the tip of her tongue, but the Princess stopped herself. If they did that, they would be completely at odds with the Igsem faction, and an all out war would have broken out by now.

Realizing that the Princess had swallowed her words, Ikuta explained with an awkward smile:

「… In this situation, it would be all over once we clearly side with either faction, Your Highness. The three way balance is only possible because our relation is fluid. We are working together with the Igsem faction now, but the situation will change again in the Dafuma Province, and we will hinder each other's search. And of course, we will do this in the safest way possible. In any case, the ending I'm looking for is a peaceful resolution with the Remeon faction having the edge. I will make them give up on establishing a military government, and reach a consensus with the Igsem faction on improving the policies and structure of the military. Most important of all— I don't want anyone to be punished at the end of everything, no matter which faction they chose to side with. So there won't be any war criminals. This is important, since my head is on the line too.」

Ikuta pointed at his own head jokingly. After a brief pause, the youth looked up at the cloudy sky:

「If everything goes well— the Remeon faction will have a strong hold over the Imperial Army, and the Igsem faction will lose influence

and be given less responsibilities. In a sense, that will be relieving them of their heavy burden. The responsibility she has to shoulder will also—」

Ikuta muttered as he stared at the far horizon. The girl felt sad seeing him like this, and averted her eyes.

「Is this the path of light that you are hoping for...?」

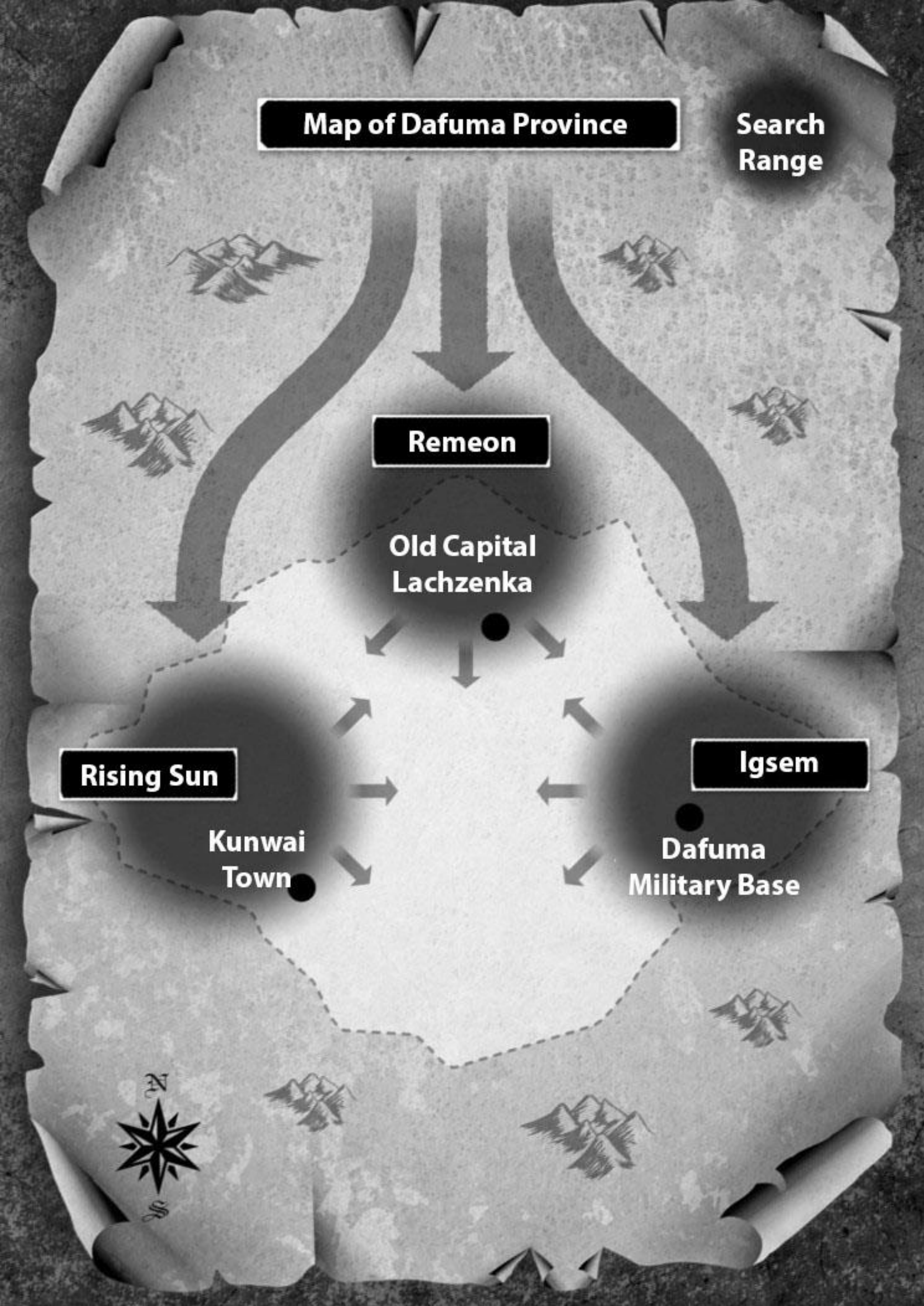
As she thought about herself getting burned by that light, Princess Chamille mumbled to herself with a trembling voice.

Nine days after setting off, with the Dafuma Province right before them, Ikuta's group headed west, parting ways with the hostile Igsem faction that headed east. There wasn't any skirmishes, which made the soldiers from both forces sigh in relief.

Everything has been proceeding as expected. Keeping the Remeon faction that arrived earlier in mind, they had already decided the area to set up base to avoid meaningless confrontation in this early stage.

The Remeon search unit that had the advantage of taking the shortest route moved straight into the northern side of the province, and expanded their search zone from there. On the other hand, the Igsem linked up with their friendly forces at the eastern part of the province to make up for their deficit in numbers.

Ikuta's group had to avoid avoid overlapping their search zone with the other two factions, and by the process of elimination, headed into the Province from the west. They would fall behind in the initial phase, but their priority was to avoid conflict, and there was no meaning in going against that policy to seize territory.


Map of Dafuma Province
Search
Range
Remeon
Old Capital
Lachzenka
Rising Sun
Kunwai
Town
Igsem
Dafuma
Military Base
N
S

「Alright, let’s get started— each battalion are to head towards their assigned zones!」

After saying that, Ikuta started issuing orders to the officers under his charge. As the objective was to conduct a search, there was no point keeping their forces static. They had to despatch each battalion to their assigned zone, and the battalions would then conduct the search in their zone.

「Let’s go, Ma-kun!」 「Yes!」

The six battalion set off to their respective zones, and the commanders of two of these battalions were Torway and Matthew. They had gone through a reorganization since the Hiored Ore Mines campaign, and the two of them had been promoted to Brevet Captains. They were now battalion commanders under Ikuta’s command.

「We will need to secure the supply point, and find a water source.」

「Yes, I have a place in mind. Kunwai town that is 40km east of here.」

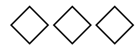
Torway pointed to a spot on the map. The 1,200 men under their charge would be working together for the upcoming mission. The pudgy youth nodded in agreement.

「Looks great. We will be searching the central zone, and the traffic network seems good too. I hope the townsfolk will give us their support.」

「Or rather, we will be in deep trouble if we can’t count on them. We are lightly equipped for this mission, and didn’t bring any supply wagons as they will slow us down.」

「Even if we ration it sparingly, our supplies will dry up in three days. Sigh, we have to figure this out. It will be an utter disgrace to starve to death in our own country.」

Matthew laughed sarcastically. The jade eyed youth smiled in response, and they started their march.



On the other hand, the Remeon faction that arrived at the Dafuma Province four days ago had started their search after swiftly setting up their base.

「Report! We have completed the search of the houses in zone one to zone seven of the city! We didn't find any traces of the Emperor or the Chancellor」

「Continue the search. The basement, storeroom, secret rooms— even the pens for livelock, search thoroughly.」

A woman ordered emotionlessly. The community center of the old capital Lachzenka was being used as a command headquarters, and Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Kursk studied the reports sent in by her subordinates. They had done a thorough search of seventy percent of the city, and had not found any signs of the Emperor.

「So they are not in the old capital…?」

She was just affirming that with a mutter, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika didn't really feel anxious about that— since her opponent was a sly fox, she didn't think it will be so easy to catch him. There were proper ways to hunt a fox, and she was still at a stage of sending helpers into the hills to chase her prey.

「Uwah— M-My apologies!」

A panicky voice disrupted her train of thought. The officer who was opening the door to exit seemed to have hit someone, and when she saw the tall figure from the door gap, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika said:

「Enter, Major.」

「Pardon my intrusion.」

The figure answered softly and stepped into the commander's office.

His features were proper and well defined, and had a sharp air about him. His blue eyes under his short rugged hair had a dangerous gleam. Rather than a sign of his ambition— he looked closer to a beast that had been forced into a corner.

「Only the finishing touches are left for the Lachzenka search. I left it to the First battalion, and I will start searching my assigned zone too. Permission to proceed.」

「Granted… However, I have a request. Take a deep breathe.」

The man frowned after hearing that, and when the 「Ice Lady」 stared into his eyes, he followed his orders obediently and breathe in deep. His superior officer nodded at the sight of that.

「You seemed really flustered. I won't ask why, but remember this well— you have the tendency of failing when besieged by such emotions.」

The Lieutenant Colonel cautioned him with the tone of a teacher. The man bit his lips with his canines:

「… I will keep that in mind, Mdm.」

「Well done on giving that answer. Carry on.」

With that, the man saluted, turned and left. After leaving the commander's office, a soldier who was one size bigger than the man was waiting outside. After acknowledging each other with a gaze, they walked out together.

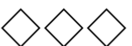
「Are we setting off, big brother?」

「Yes, Sushu. Old hag Lucika gave her permission.」

The man brushed his hand up across his face as he said that. He didn't need to do that now, but he couldn't stop his habit from when his hair was long.

「Our chance is finally here, let's get rid of the troublesome people and advance forward. Be it the Igsem, 『Rising Sun Regiment』, or our little brother who turned his back on his family…!」

Without concealing the dangerous air about him, Sarihasrag Remeon walked forth with a murderous aura. Sushuraf who was walking beside him nodded, and speed up to match his brother's pace.



On top of the issue of taking in Torway's group, trouble was brewing in the Kunwai Town. Before the soldiers arrived there, the citizens felt a strong sense of unease. They only learned about this through unconfirmed rumors, but they noticed that something big was happening in Central. It was only to be expected that the visiting soldiers were surrounded by the crowd craving for news.

「The northern route has been blockaded! I can't contact my son in Central, what's going on here!」

「What's with that Jewel Voice Broadcast? Is His Majesty okay!?」

「P-Please wait! Everyone, calm down…!」

Torway who came out to greet the citizens as the unit commander was troubled by the citizens mobbing him. He didn't know how to sooth the crowd, and was too gentle to brush them off and execute his duty as a soldier.

「Don't worry! We will explain the entire situation to everyone!」

The mildly rotund youth who grew up with a close relationship to the local citizens offered his aid.

「As you have noticed, a part of the Imperial Army has turned traitor! We are the subjugation army sent to defeat these traitors! They might be hiding around this place, so we will set up patrols to ensure your safety! Please lend us your aid!」

It was a lie that included some truth. This is just like something Ikuta would do, Matthew thought as he continued his speech:

「The roads have been blockaded to stop the traitors from escaping! It will cause delays in traveling and cargo transport, but

that will be temporary, please bear with us for the inconvenience caused! The Jewel Voice Broadcast is proof of that—」

He crafted his lies logically, which relieved the unease of the crowd a lot. After persuading them for ten minutes, Matthew felt the crowd's pressure easing and took that chance to force his way through the crowd, pulling Torway along with him. He whispered to the youth as they walked:

「You are really bad with situations like this! When you encounter mobs like this, just do what you can to put them at ease! You can worry about the specifics of your words later!」

「T-Thank you, Ma-kun. But is that really fine, if they see through that lie…」

「Shush—! It won't be seen through, and don't call it a lie! Neither the Igsem nor the Remeon factions would declared that 『a coup is ongoing right now』! They don't want to let the citizens learn the truth, so what I said is a common lie amongst the entire military!」

In this sense, Matthew was more practical than Ikuta. Thanks to that, Torway's group immediately met with a middle aged man who claimed to be the Mayor.

After dealing with the townsfolk, they ironed out the details on procuring food and other supplies smoothly. With these preparations done, they worked on their primary objective:

「Let's start with confirming the situation around here. Scout unit, move out!」

On the battalion commander's command, two platoon of cavalry split into 8 sections and trotted out of the base. Most of the 600 men in the 3 companies that made up the battalion were windgunners, but there were also a small group of riders responsible for communications and reconnaissance. There were also fire soldiers, medics and illumination troops that supported the battalion.

「The main windgunners unit will move by company level. We will search towards the southeast, and maintain our distance with each other as we sweep the area. You might think this is a too reserved…」

「This is an open plain, it's hard to spread out and use cover. In this situation, our foot soldiers will have to defend ourselves by moving in a group… I have no objections, let's exercise more caution.」

Matthew concurred with Torway with a solemn face. From this moment on, their expression was no longer relaxed.

The outskirts of their search zone had a good chance of encountering the forces from the other factions. They had to watch over their assigned zone, and repel any invading enemy forces.

And of course, there was a high chance of a battle. Even a skirmish with the aim of keeping other forces at bay might result in death— Or rather, they couldn't keep the enemy forces away without inflicting some death. The battlefield they were heading into was like diluted poison. They would hit a fatal dosage if they kept drinking it, and there would be an all out battle eventually.

「… It would be easier if we had more cavalry. Really now, Yatori just had to absent in a crucial time like this.」

The jade eyed youth answered Matthew's grumbles with an awkward smile— Most of the cavalry from the Hiored Ore Mines campaign joined up with the Igsem faction along with Yatori. Hence, Ikuta's 「Rising Sun Regiment」 was seriously short on cavalry. After sending the riders on reconnaissance and messaging, there wasn't any cavalry left for combat purposes. The Dafuma Province was 70% open plains, so this shortage was a big worry for them.

「… Yatori-san must have it hard too. We have to work hard by ourselves this time.」

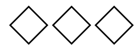
「Hmmp, of course. Her absence is no big deal, but—」

Drawing his gaze away from the youth, the pudgy youth looked casually to the northern horizon where they came from.

「― When all this is over, I want to meet up with the usual old faces. Just a bland meal at the
Central base's officer mess will do.」

「… Yes, we will, Ma-kun. Let's fight for the sake of doing that.」

Torway gave his word firmly, and Matthew nodded in agreement. In other to fulfil this small wish of theirs, the two members of the 「Knight Order」 took action.



「The initial deployment is complete! In terms of chess, we have finally placed all the pieces on the board.」
<TL: Shogi>

At the same time, in the field headquarters set up behind Matthew's group, Ikuta and Princess Chamille were staring at a map on the table. It has been a month since the coup was staged, which was the mid point of the two month time limit they set beforehand.

「We can finally begin our search. But from the look of the map, the search area is drifting too far to the south of the province…?」

The Princess asked moodily as she looked at the deformed ovals on the map that indicates the search area. The dark haired youth shook his head:

「This is fine. Or rather, this is the only choice. Our numbers and cavalry are far fewer than the Remeon and Igsem factions. No matter how much we try, we can't widen our search zone to match them. And so, we have to use a plan for a force with smaller numbers― Pick the key area and get a headstart.」

「A headstart… Is that the reason why we sent our units to detour from the south?」

「That’s right. The Remeon faction will move from north to south, the Igsem faction sweeps from west to southeast. So the encirclement will get smaller towards the south, and the location of the Emperor will be confined to the narrow stretch to the south.」

「That’s correct, but won’t one of the factions find the Emperor during their search?」

「Then the coup is over. If the Remeon or Igsem faction find the Emperor in their search zone, then we can’t interfere— But that’s fine. Our main goal is to prevent the military conflict from escalating. For example, if the Remeon faction finds the Emperor, the Igsem faction might consider securing him forcefully out of desperation. Here’s where we play our role. If a battle breaks out, the winner would be exhausted from the fight. We might be able to net the benefit of the Snipe Clam Grapple*— By making them aware of this possibility, we can stop either side from making any rash moves. At the very least, we can stop an all out fight.」

<TL: 漁夫の利 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fight_Between_the_Snipe_and_the_Clam >

「Yes, I understand the effect of our presence, but…」

「We are like a form of balancing machine. Not finding the Emperor will be a real problem. When the search is confined to the south of the province, clashes will be inevitable, like shutting three dogs inside a dog house. And the troubling thing is, there’s a good chance of that happening. When hunters come from the north, west and east, the fox will naturally flee to the south.」

「… You are saying that Trisnai won’t just be hiding and will evade the search too?」

「Of course he will run when we are onto him. He will send this coup into chaos, drag out the conflict between the factions, and torment us as much as possible— I don’t understand his motive, but

that is the only way to please him. If not, things wouldn’t have turned out so ridiculously.」

After saying that with a bitter tone, Ikuta’s face suddenly turned serious:

「… That’s right, this isn’t a treasure hunt, but a foxhunt. The commanders of the other factions must have realized this by now. That’s why the initial phase where the three forces set up their bases had gone so smoothly. Limiting the escape path to one route works out for all of us.」

「I see, so we are in the chasing the prey phase… But we won’t be the only one sending troops to the south.」

「As you expected, if we can’t find the Emperor, all the forces will congregate in the south. When I mention getting a headstart earlier, I was referring to this scenario that has a high probablity of happening. Specifically speaking— I want to secure our base in the south before we fall into a stalemate.」

The youth explained his plan and pursed his lips tightly.

「… That’s why I sent the most trustworthy battalion under Torway to execute this mission. It is an important mission, and there is a high chance of encountering forces from another faction that has the same intention, so it’s very dangerous… If possible, I want to go there personally.」

Ikuta clenched his fists over the map. After hesitating for a moment, the Princess overlapped her hand over his.

「… Not just Torway, Matthew is with him too. Since you trust your companions and delegated this mission to then, then don’t agonize over your decision. The two of them can do it if they work together.」

「I think so too. However— this is a war. It’s illogical, unreasonable, and no one knows what will happen.」



As he stared at a spot on the map, where Torway and Matthew should be passing through, the youth muttered with a serious face and hoped sincerely for their safety.

After setting off from Kunwai Town from an entire day, Torway's group headed southeast cautiously.

There seemed to be no end to the green plains, and looked safe at a glance. Aside from sheeps grazing the pasture leisurely, they didn't run into anything. The rural scene spread as far as the eyes could see, and most of the soldiers slowly eased their tension— however…

「… I feel uneasy. Did I get too used to battles in the mountains during my time in the northern territories…?」

Matthew who was commanding a battalion felt anxious. He would scanned the horizon every minute to check for abnormalities, which gave him a moment of peace— and kept repeating that.

And of course, he felt that he was being paranoid, but didn't plan to stop doing that. Because the dark haired youth cautioned him repeatedly that his worries were warranted.

「… The terrain is simple, but don't assume this will be a peaceful trip… huh.」

The slightly pudgey youth muttered as he recalled Ikuta's warning— The endless plain seemed to be emphasizing that trivial tricks wouldn't work here. If they encounter enemy forces that outnumbered them, then their defeat would be inevitable. When that happens, they had to escape as soon as possible.

That means detecting the enemy early was the key to survival, and couldn't be taken lightly. During their march to the Dafuma Province, Ikuta suggested to his comrades:

「Leave the scouting to the advance cavalry platoon to guard against sneak attacks. Don't stray too far from Torway's battalion during movement… It will be fine. Yes, no problems there.」

The slightly plump youth nodded repeatedly, as if he was trying to convince himself.

According to their prediction, the largest enemy unit they would encounter should be battalion size. In order to sweep the vast lands of the Dafuma Province, each factions had to make careful use of their forces. With that in mind, the 「Rising Sun Regiment」 sent in two battalion of wind gunners.

Even if they encounter enemy forces larger than a battalion, they could retreat swiftly. As the plan was for sourcing food locally, Matthew’s group was lightly equipped, and could easily escape from other forces traveling on foot. On top of that, unless the enemy was keen on mutual destruction, they wouldn’t start a fight either.

The problem was encountering cavalry units. However, it was hard to imagine them running into a battalion sized cavalry unit. Since the objective was to search for the Emperor, that would be an inefficient use of their forces. So during their search, the largest likely size of a cavalry unit would be company level at most.

If it was one company— which was around 200 horsemen, Matthew’s unit would be able to handle them. It would be tough if the enemy had larger numbers, but if Matthew linked up with the friendly forces nearby, they would be able to turn the tide. A bell would be rang when they discover signs of the enemy, and it would take 20 minutes for reinforcements to arrive— even if they were pitted against cavalry, Matthew could stall that much time.

「… That’s right, we are adequately prepared. We can handle any attacks, we have covered everything. So please— just let this continue without any incident until the end…!」

After scanning the surroundings, Matthew concluded his thoughts with a prayer. As his face was too serious, his adjutant was hesitant on speaking with him— but before the adjutant could make up his

mind, the bell sunk the youth's sincere wishes, as it echoed out under the gloomy and cloudy sky.

「—!」

Matthew stared with his eyes wide, and the soldiers grew tense. The pudgey youth listened keenly to the bell. Twice, once— and then repeats. This bell code meant only one thing:

「A company of enemy cavalry is approaching! Assume square formation to repel the assault!」

Matthew's order was clear and decisive, and the soldiers snapped out of their stupor and started to move. Four of the five platoons of each company formed a square formation at 90 degrees angle around the company command platoon. The 40 men of the platoon formed three ranks, facing outwards. The three companies formed three square formations with the green plains as its background.

「The enemy is in sights!」「There's no time, formed up quickly!」

The last platoon formed a circular formation in the middle of the squares, and Matthew who was standing in their middle took out a telescope in an attempt to catch a glimpse of the approaching enemy.

「Distance, what about the distance…?」

A small number of riders sprint through his narrow field of vision. Matthew was surprised for a moment, but they were the scouts that detected the enemy. A few minutes later— their target appeared. A cavalry unit kicking up a storm of dust appeared from the southeast horizon, which made the pudgey youth clicked his tongue.

「They are faster than expected, and is less than 2km away! Fix bayonets!」

All the windgunners in square formation fixed their bayonets. The first rank knelt, the second stood, and the third rank leaned out

between the gaps of their comrades, each adopting their own shooting stances. In the middle of the completed square formation, Matthew continued to track the enemy with his telescope. They were close enough for their equipment to be visible.

「The light cavalry— is starting to form ranks… Hey, aren't they too many of them?」

「There are about 400 of them! That's two companies, or an unorthodox battalion!」

The scouts misjudged the scale of the enemy forces. Matthew cursed when he heard the correction by his adjutant, and kept his eyes on the enemy— the advantage of light cavalry lies with their light equipment and mobility, and they were mainly armed with sabers and crossbow fixed with spears. They either wore light armor or no armor at all, and compared to heavy cavalry with polearms and plate armor, their charge was weaker, but no other soldier type could match their speed.

「They are readying for a charge! Damn it! They are full of drive, and didn't even give any warning!」

He was familiar with light cavalry. Not only that, they were the soldier type that was the most prominent on the battlefield. As he thought about this— a fiery haired figure flashed across his mind and froze his thoughts.

— Could this be that guy's unit…?

「They are in effective range! Battalion commander, your orders please!」

The anxious shout of his adjutant pulled Matthew back to reality. Remembering that there was no time to hesitate, Matthew shout at the top of his lungs, as if he was trying to shake off any hesitation:

「F-Fire in volley! Aim for the horses!」

「Yes, Sir!」 「Ready, aim…」 「Fire!」

The explosion of compressed air erupted with that order. Countless bullets flew through the air towards the enemy cavalry, felling numerous horses. They repeated the volley several times— but the enemy didn't falter at all.

「Incoming! Raise your rifles—!」

The charge of the cavalry from up close— their speed and weight was like a tsunami. As fear gripped the hearts of the soldier, Matthew sunk his fingers deep into his trembling shoulder— calm down, we can tide through it with the square formation!

Because of their natural instinct, horses would stop in front of obstacles higher than their eye level, and wouldn't be able to charge into the fence of bayonets before them. There might be some casualties in front, but the square formation itself would hold…!

As the tense Matthew watched with bated breath, the fore of the enemy cavalry reached the square formation. The soldiers took their stance and braced themselves from the impact. However— they couldn't feel the heavy weight of the horses on their bayonets.

「—Huh?」

Their vision suddenly turn dim. The sunlight from the sky had been covered by the body of the horses. The troops were dumbstruck by this impossible scene, and the heavy hooves of the horses stamp down on their defenceless heads.

「Ahh—?」

The enemy cavalry jump clear of the bayonet fences easily. The nightmarish scene before him made Matthew recall something.

— Long before the youth was born, during the period when the war with the Kioka was the most intense, the man renown as the fiercest commander in the Empire was proficient in this tactic. By constant training to twist the natural instinct of the horses, his cavalry unit could jump as they charge. They were said to destroy the enemy formation by jumping inside, instead of the outside.

A legend who was known as the Fierce general— Yorunzaf Igsem of the Jump Cavalry.

「— This is bullshit—!」

A protest against the gods came out of his throat. What makes a war a war— according to the dark haired youth, was being illogical and unreasonable. These malicious twins were assaulting Matthew Tetzirich in the worst way possible.

「Ha— Fufufuf!」

The flying dust, splashing blood and crude shouts from both sides filled the air. The sounds of the battlefield was music to the ears of Honorary General Yorunzaf Igsem, and he felt elated to be here. The blood coursing through his body heated up, and it felt as if he had been rejuvenated to his youth.

The old General watched as his subordinates jumped into the enemy square formation. After forty years, he had revived his fangs of old, the Jump Cavalry. The number of subordinates who served with him from back then could be counted with just one hand, so this was basically a brand new unit. However, its prowess was as good as its predecessor.

The expert riders in the front ranks made full use of the agility of light cavalry and jumped right into the inside of the enemy formation. As they disrupt the enemy from within, their allies behind them would charge in and break the formation apart— That was the tactic of Fierce General Yorunzaf's jump charge. A prey bitten by sharp fangs would flee without even fighting back, however—

「… Hmm?」

The next instant, General Yorunzaf frowned and looked closely. The enemy's command structure wasn't as chaotic as he expected.

On closer inspection, he realized the reason was the platoon in circular formation in the center of the square formations. They fought off the cavalry jumping in and rushed to shore up the places

that suffered the worst hit. A plump youth who looked to be in his teens was shouting in the center of the circular formation.

「Don't falter, keep on firing! It's all over if the square formation crumbles!」

The youth called out to his comrades as he joined in the fight with his bayonet affixed wind gun. Compared to the wind gunners in the square formation, the barrels of these soldiers were 20% shorter, and were hunting troops that sacrifice range for the sake of chaotic fights. That was why they could handle the unexpected melee battle.

「Oh～ that's interesting!」

When he saw the spirited struggle of his opponent, 「One Armed Igsem」 couldn't hold himself back anymore. He ignored the restrain of his adjutant, pulled the reins on his horse and charged personally into the enemy formation that was flickering like a candle in the wind.

「You aren't bad at fighting, young chap! I will acknowledge that taking your head is a worthy war merit!」

The old general reaped the lives of several soldiers with his saber along the way before they could register his signature fiery red hair and lone arm. When he cut the third man down, the pudgy youth noticed his approaching opponent, and stared with his eyes wide as if he just saw a monster— and the old General aimed at his target with a faint smile:

「Hyaa!」

As if he was saying that trivial tricks were useless, he charged straight at his prey. The soldiers who realized their commander was the target quickly put up a defence, but they were too late. General Yorunzaf's horse leapt over the heads of the soldiers blocking his way as if they were just pebbles by the roadside.

「Warrghh!」

He locked eyes with Matthew who was standing stiffly while in mid air— Now, what are you going to do, boy? I will cut you down if you go right, stomp you if you go left, you have nowhere to run!

But the slightly plump youth didn't choose either options. In that instant, he closed his eyes and braced himself, then rolled under the horse! General Yorunzaf was caught off guard and couldn't attack the opponent that had disappeared from his sights.

The horse landed heavily onto the ground. As the momentum pushed it forward, the old General felt a killing intent directed at the back of his neck and leaned onto his horse. A bullet flew through the space his head was just a moment ago.

He turned back in surprised, and that slightly plump youth had raised his wind gun with his back on the grass.

「— Hahaha! What a tenacious young fellow!」

Let's turn back and continue the fight— the general considered the idea half seriously, but the soldiers beside Matthew aimed their muzzles at him one after another, so he couldn't dwell here any longer. General Yorunzaf charged out from the opposite end of the enemy formation, leaving the square formation on the verge of collapse behind him. Several bullets chased after his back, but none of them hit.

「I'm feeling it, let's charge again! Let's put some distance between us first!」

The ravaging cavalry unit completed their first charge and kept going. Understanding the intent of the old general, the troops had reformed ranks several hundred metres away.

「That young chap already experienced intense battles at the frontlines at such a young age! Follow me, bastards! The square formation is falling apart, don't let your guard down until the very end. Before we deal the final blow—」

General Yorunzaf saw one of his men suddenly fell off his horse mid sentence.

「Huh—?」 「Hey, what's wrong!」

As his comrades looked at the soldier who fell head first onto the plains, another three suffered the same fate. The general noticed something was amiss and scan the area, and to the north of his unit that was reforming ranks— he found the cause of this phenomenon on top of a gentle slope.

「Wind gunners…? Are you kidding me, they are targeting us from so far away!」

It was more than 300m away. Their Air Rifles had a further effective range than what Yorunzaf knew.

「Continue to fire! Don't give them the chance to reform ranks!」

Torway's sniper team continued supporting fire from a small hill. The attack from super long range sent the horsemen of the fiery haired general to an eternal slumber.

The jade eyed youth still felt flustered despite seeing the results. Because even from a distant, he could see how severe the damage his comrades had suffered.

「We are late…! One more charge and that square formation will break!」

Torway told himself that he couldn't miss a single shot for the sake of rescuing his comrades. Torway and his subordinates squeezed the trigger of their Air Rifles, and the shots raining death on the enemy from afar grew more accurate—

The shots fired from afar took the lives of his men slow but steadily. Faced with this chilling sight that was impossible in the battlefields of the past, General Yorunzaf immediately chose to disengage.

「That’s the rumored sniper team…? This is bad, retreat! All units, fall back!」

Without any obsession towards the prey that was ripe for the killing, the old general judged that it was time to withdraw and retreated with his men. The bullets continued to rain down stubbornly from behind, but they didn’t do any damage beyond their effective range.

After pulling back to safety, the 「One Armed Igsem」 relished the new entry in his long history of battles.

「So this is modern warfare…! Like Yatori said, this is a pain to deal with.」

The old General muttered cheerfully. The unexpected resistance and unexpected counter attack. As he trembled from excitement from these facts, his heart was filled with joy.

An easy smile appeared on the old General’s lips. He loved how illogical and unreasonable war was, more than anyone else. Frolicking with these twins was the way Fierce General Yorunzaf lived his life, and his was to fight in a war for his entire life. That was why…

「Ahh— it’s good to live a long life.」

The man said with an innocent expression, as he relished in surviving the battle with his aging body.

As he watched the enemy retreat, Torway’s group stopped firing and rushed down the slope to their allies in square formation.

「Begin rescue operation! Split into sections and tend to the wounded!」

More accurately speaking, it was formerly a square formation. One of the three square formation looked as if a giant’s palm smashed through them, and couldn’t keep up the formation.

「W-Where’s the battalion commander? Where’s Ma-kun…!」

Torway swept his gaze across the groaning casualties with a face of horror. A familiar voice quickly reach him.

「Here, Torway… I'm here.」

Torway realized who was calling out to him, and sigh in relief, his knees almost giving out. He then ran to the pudgy youth.

「Ma-kun, I'm glad that you are safe…! I was worried that I came too late!」

「Yes… to be honest, I don't even know why I'm still alive. Hey～ will you believe it? The hooves crush the ground on either side of my head. Who else in the world saw the belly of a charging horse from below?」

Matthew tried talking a bunch to ward off the fear creeping up in him. Torway waited for him to calm down a little, then said after looking around him:

「This is serious damage. The enemy are light cavalry, but they managed to damage the square formation so much in so little time…」

「That's no mere light cavalry, that's the legendary Jump Cavalry. Commanded by 『One Armed Igsem』 himself.」

When he heard that name, Torway thought it was a joke or just a comparison. However, the slightly plump youth continued with a serious attitude:

「It's that Fierce General Yorunzaf. Fiery red hair and lone arm, the man himself. An old man in his seventies and retired from active duty charged into the center of the formation and came right at me with a smile… If not for the Captain's blessing, I might already be dead.」

Matthew said as he took out the compass from his pocket. That was the amulet Polminue Jurgus entrusted to him when they parted ways with the Navy— a keepsake from the Great Captain Garciev, He

felt that the luck of the Captain saved his life and was grateful to his descendant of the Pirate Navy.

「… When the cavalry reached our formation, the leading group jumped over our formation. They didn't charge in, but literally jump. I have never seen such an agile cavalry unit. I don't think Yatori can emulate that either.」

「How is that possible… No, if the legends are true, then it just might be… Given the current situation, it make sense for them to recall retired soldiers. Hence, General Yorunzaf returned to the battlefield…」

「Even if he did return to active duty, would any sensible man of his standing rove around with a cavalry unit～? I don't remember the details, but I think he got promoted to the general ranks on his retirement! And after that, he was given an honorary rank of Lieutenant General or General— in any case, he's a high ranking general! Not someone who should be prancing around in the frontlines!」

Matthew raved loudly. After complaining about the illogical and unreasonable things thrown at him, he turned to his subordinates with a bitter expression.

「One company is almost destroyed, and there is also the issue of tending to the casualties too, so the effectiveness of my battalion will be halved. There are many seriously wounded, if we don't hurry to the next base for them to rest up…」

「What about turning back… No, we can't. We have a mission to complete.」

「That's true, we are closer to the next destination than Kunwai Town too, so we should go on. Judging from the direction the enemy retreated to, there is a good chance our prospective base has not been taken yet… At least, that's what I feel.」

Matthew said without any confidence. After nodding stiffly in agreement, Torway started directing his men to carry the wounded.

Their units reached their destination in the evening.

Next to one of the sparse forest in the province was a village, and they resupplied there before setting camp on a nearby hill. The south of the hill face the forest, and aside from the advantage of having the high ground, they had the option of hiding into the forest in a pinch. Needless to say, they chose this position to guard against cavalry attacks.

The serious casualties from the previous battle were entrusted to the village, while the lightly wounded were ordered to recuperate in the base. Including the soldiers tending to the wounded, there were more than 200 non combatants in Matthew's unit.

After suffering terrible losses to his battalion, the pudgey youth sighed:

「Our forces were already smaller than the other factions, and now we lost so many men from the start…」

「Yes, it's tough… However, Sir Yorunzaf didn't give any warning before attacking right? In other words, this is also part of their search zone?」

「Sigh, given that 『One Armed Igsem』 is here personally, this must be a important strategic area for them… Which means our search zone will overlap. I don't want to think about this, but we might have to fight that old man again in the future…?」

The thought of that old general's ferocious smile made Matthew shiver— at this moment, Torway who was watching the sun setting down the horizon spotted friendly riders coming back with his keen eyesight.

「The scouts are back. We can learn the situation around this area now, Ma-kun.」

Less than ten minutes later, the leader of the riders that reconned the surrounding area came to Matthew and Torway to make his report with a salute:

「We have finished reconnaissance of the 2 km radius and the designated areas. We didn't find any signs of the enemy. According to scout reports, the prospective base 22 km to the east and the designated search area another 20 km to the east had been occupied by other forces.」

「They stole a march on us… Any idea which faction occupied these two places?」

「My apologies, we didn't manage to find out in our earnestness to avoid enemy detection… We do know the scale of the forces. The former is about two battalions, the latter about one battalion. The former has more infantry, while the latter is mostly cavalry. And of course, this only refers to the troops that were in base at that time.」

「They would obviously send out troops for search and reconnaissance, so both bases should have another battalion. As for the factions, it makes more sense for the closer one should be the Remeon faction, while the further one is Igsem.」

「Hmm～… that should be true if we go by the ratio of soldier types, but that's not for certain. I will prefer not to guess…」

Torway crossed his arms in deep thought, and came up with a plan soon after:

「… Okay, let's send a messenger instead of a scout. Go to the closer opponent, if they really are from the Remeon faction, let's try to make an alliance with them.」

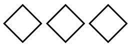
「Yes, we should do that. Ikuta also said that if we don't find the Emperor, he would prefer the Remeon faction to find His Majesty. I don't want to fight that violent old man alone either.」

Matthew had no objections. It would be great if they could work together, and just agreeing not to hinder each other would eliminate their enemies by half. However, they didn't think things would go so smoothly.

「The problem is, will they agree to this? There is merit in trying even though the chances are meagre… Can I leave the negotiations to you when the opportunity arises?」

The youth turned stiff when Matthew asked him that. After a long moment of silence, he nodded slowly:

「Yes, I will do it… No matter what, I'm still a son of the Remeon house.」



As the clear water surface fell into darkness, the cries of the frogs and bugs became noisier than the day. The noise disturbed his thoughts, and made Sarihasrag Remeon click his tongue:

「Tch… That's why I hate setting up camp next to a lake. It's so damn noisy at night.」

「Bear with it, big brother.」

「Yes, I know. We set up camp with our backs to the lake to defend against cavalry attack, I don't want to have that Igsem old man poke us in the ass.」

The eldest son of the Remeon house, Sushuraf, answered his brother with a snort. They set up their base here to counter the threat of cavalry.

Having their backs to the lake not only prevented attacks on their rear, but made it almost impossible to charge in from the front too. As the cavalry would continue to charge forward after running through the base, they would go right into the lake.

On the other hand, having nowhere to run with their backs to the lake was a horrifying weak point. Such terrain had been used since

ancient times to inspire unmotivated troops to fight desperately. But they weren't after this effect this time. They chose this base that offered no retreat because they were confident of being the biggest force in this region, and could count on even more reinforcements.

「Three battalions, 1,800 men… After that old man's hit and run, our numbers are around 1,600?」

Sarihasrag muttered disgustedly. Like Torway's group, they were attacked by Yorunzaf when they first arrived at Dafuma Province.

「Never mind, we still have enough numbers to perform our mission. We made the preparation for the next fight too— be it the Igsem faction or the Ikuta Solork gang, I will destroy them all.」

The man's face was filled with murderous intent. As Sushuraf concurred with a short reply, a subordinate approached him briskly:

「Major, a report! A messenger came from an enemy faction! It's the 『Rising Sun Regiment』 search team that had set up camp on the hills 22 km to our west!」

Sarihasrag furrowed his brows when he heard that name. He was promoted to Major due to the dire circumstances. He urged his subordinate with a 「Continue.」

「Yes Sir. They are requesting to work together for the search, would you like to peruse the letter?」

After opening the letter given to him, Sarihasrag read the content closely. It states plainly that they wish to cooperate with the Remeon faction to search for the Emperor, and their reasons. The proposal made sense— but when he saw the name used to sign off the letter, veins appeared on his forehead.

「… How dare a traitor request for our cooperation. I haven't seen him in a while, and he became so thick skinned…!」

When he heard those words, Sushuraf understood the situation without even needing to read the letter. He asked with a calm voice:

「Is their commander Torway? What do they mean by cooperating?」

「Not to interfere with each other's activity, share information, and work together against the Igsem faction— What kind of joke is this?」

Sarihasrag crumbled the letter, then toss it back to his subordinate.

「Tell the messenger: 『We won't work together with traitors. Get in our way and we will kill you』.」

「J-Just a verbal reply?」

「You heard me.」

「… Yes Sir!」

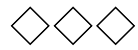
When he said that with an icy glare, his subordinate turned and left with a shiver. His brother asked calmly about this refusal to cooperate:

「Is that fine, big brother?」

「What's wrong with this? Who knows if they suggest the same terms to the Igsem faction? Not interfering with each other, sharing information or working together against a common enemy, we can't do any of this if we don't trust them. And I obviously can't do that. Toruru is Ikuta Solork's bitch now, who knows what he is thinking.」

Sarihasrag spat out these words before turning and leave. He headed to the command tent with crude steps, and muttered in a deep voice:

「It's useless to cheat like the mock battle back then. Don't look down on your big brother, Toruru……!」



On that same night, after receiving that curt reply from the messenger, Torway hugged his head in deep thought:

「This answer… It is definitely my big brother…!」

They lived together since they were young, and the youth noticed this fact with his instinct as a little brother. 「Ughh～」 Matthew's face contorted when he heard that:

「Captain Sarihasrag is their commander…? Are you kidding me, what is the Remeon faction's manpower management doing?」

Matthew could remember what happened during their mock battle, no wonder he felt this way. Torway shook his head weakly.

「Ma-kun, don't look down on my brother. He was taking us lightly during the mock battle, and Ik-kun had the tactical advantage. He isn't someone that could be defeated easily.」

「Is that so? To be honest, I don't have any good impression of him…」

Or rather, Matthew's only impression of him was his unsightly side, but Matthew was hesitant to say that in front of his brother. Matthew then switch topics:

「Anyway, the important thing is what should we do next. Our opponent is difficult this time, any chance we can convince him?」

「…… Sorry to betray your expectations, but persuading my brother is…」

「It's fine~ I understand. Just want to make sure.」

The slightly plump youth didn't complain and said with an awkward smile. His gentle attitude towards this failure made the jade eyed youth feel bad.

「Sigh, we have to count on ourselves… no, we still have the option of offering the Igsem faction the same terms, then steal a march on them. But being a cunning linguist is Ikuta's expertise, it's hard for us to pull it off.」

「Yes, I agree. But what can we do now…?」

Matthew pondered with his arms crossed, but he didn't seem anxious or flustered. After experiencing many live battles, he slowly

gained the tenacious mental strength to not falter in adversity without even realizing it.

「… We are short on men and cavalry, which mean our search area is small. In short, we are in a difficult situation.」

「Right.」

「Simply put, we are at a major disadvantage compared to the other forces. We can't win in a straight out fight or in our search. What we should do in this situation— there was a group that showed us that before, remember?」

Matthew raised his index finger and as he said that. After thinking for a few seconds, the jade eyed youth found the answer:

「That's right, the Shinaak tribe…!」

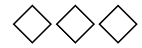
「Correct. Their numbers and proficiency were worse than us, but they gave us a really hard time. Lieutenant General Safida's incompetence played a part too— but the biggest reason was that the Shinaak tribe fought in a way suitable for a small force from the very start.」

The pudgy youth turned his gaze as he spoke, and looked out into the endless plains covered by the night. It was a darkness that concealed everything— but in his eyes, that was the most reliable companion.

「This is a good chance, let's emulate them. We paid an expensive price for that lesson, so we should make full use of it.」

Matthew said like a child that just thought of a mischievous idea. Torway leaned forward as they discussed the details of this secret plan.

Like two delinquent who lack the decisive shamelessness when discussing something devious, they decided on their plans for the future.



「… Hahh～」

In the dim Lantern light, Private First Class Bande yawned as he looked at the horses that had fallen asleep standing.

He was on the two hours night watch, but the fatigue during his search in the day made him struggle against his urge to sleep.

「Hey, cover up with your hand. If the General saw that, he will crack your skull.」

His colleague Private First Class Minguru elbowed him with a warning, but Bande's eyes remained drowsy:

「… They sure are amazing～ they ran around so much during the day, and can still sleep while standing.」

He muttered as he stared blankly at the horses. Minguru sighed, and chatted with Bande to keep themselves awake:

「To be honest, they probably want to sit down to sleep, and will do so when they get used to the stables here.」

「Horses don't sleep much either, and will be full of energy after sleeping three to four hours. I want to be a horse too.」

「Then you have to eat grass everyday. Can you live the rest of your live without eating meat?」

「Ah, I can't. I can't do it after all.」

Bande answered lazily, and Minguru snickered quietly. They might be outstanding horseman, but this was the extent of their idly chatter.

「How much longer until the next shift?」

「It's still early, almost an hour more.」

「We are only half done～… this is terrible～」

Bande lost his motivation and squatted down, and the spear attachment of his crossbow stabbed into the ground. Minguru raised his voice annoyingly:

「Hey, pull yourself together. We are on sentry duty here.」

「I will wake up if I can ride for a little… Just a little～」

「Moron. How can we tire our important warhorses just to perk you up—」

「Neigh!」

Sharp neighs that interrupted Minguru's admonishment rang out. The two of them looked back in surprise, and a horse that were sleeping soundly started moving in panic. They didn't run off as its reins were tied, but the noise was waking the other horses. Minguru hurried over:

「Hey, what's the matter, quiet down! Did a rat bite you?」

As he pat the back of a horse to soothe it, another horse that was sleeping some distance away neigh in the same manner. When they heard that sound, Bande pounced on Minguru, pulling him down by his collar.

「Get down, someone's shooting!」 「What?」

The two of them laid prone on the grass, and could hear the sound of air whistling above them. Bande got up with his body low and ran towards the base:

「Enemy attack! It's the enemy! Sound the alarm～!」

Everyone who heard the alarm woke up in surprise, and the quiet camp started getting rowdy. The alarm slowly propagated through the area, and the troops whose sleep got interrupted was ready for combat.

「—In the end, you didn't find the enemy?」

In the morning after the incident, General Yorunzaf who heard the report made this conclusion. The male officer who was in charge of last night's defences nodded with a serious face:

「Yes… It’s embarrassing to say this, but after the illumination troops and cavalry swept the area thoroughly, we didn’t find any traces of the enemy.」

「What about our losses? How many horses got hit?」

「Four horses are shot in the buttocks or legs, but all of them are light wounds. However, they can’t join i the charge before making a full recovery… It’s fortunate that our losses are so minimal.」

The lone armed old general laughed softly as he watched the relieved face of the officer:

「You think that’s all? Just our horses getting shot in the ass?」

「Huh…?」

The officer didn’t understand and looked baffled. Starting with that officer, General Yorunzaf swept his gaze across the soldiers standing behind that officer, and said without any frills:

「Aren’t all the people standing here all on the verge of dozing off?」

When the general pointed that out, the soldiers looked at each other in surprise.

「You lot are really slow… Never mind, that’s because you lack live combat experience, so it’s not your fault. After I retired, the Jump Cavalry is just being maintained like a hobby of sorts, where flawed soldiers who can’t become cavalry are dumped.」

His smile started to deepen. Even I’m surprised that this ridiculous shenanigans is still going on, the old general thought self mockingly.

「I have honed you into outstanding cavalry. After seeing how skilled you are, those mules in Central will lose their minds… However, good horsemanship is just circus tricks. What I taught you aren’t tricks to gain the applause of audience, but a way to win battles. No matter how fast you can ride or how high you can jump—there is no point if you don’t know war.」

General Yorunzaf stopped his laugher suddenly, and looked at his subordinates with blood red eyes. They straightened their back when this gaze fell on them.

「Compared to you lots, that little brat we fought last time knows how to fight. Am I wrong? Any objections?」

「「「「「Sir, no, sir!」」」」」

「Are you frustrated? ～ That a brat no older than a cadet is acting like your senior?.」

「「「「「Sir, yes, sir!」」」」」

The officers answered in unison. Bam! The old general slammed his hand on the table:

「Then think of a countermeasure before they mess with us again. Prove that you are a little smarter than the animal you ride on. If you can't do it, then you are not a rider, but a burden. An ugly noisy lump of meat. Are you wasting the efforts of the horses that are carrying you!?」

「「「「「Sir, no, sir!」」」」」

「I hope not! Then go!」

General Yorunzaf yelled, and the officers fled out of the tent. Only the general and a man standing by in a corner was left.

Only slightly younger than his superior— he was one of the few officers who had stayed with the Fierce General Yorunzaf for half a century. As he watched the young men leave, the corners of his lips raised in a wry smile:

「How nostalgic. You admonished like this when I first joined the unit too.」

「Stop pretending to be retarded, Daolon. You got scolded everyday until your fifth year.」

「Is that so… people our age tend to be forgetful.」

「You can forget whatever you want, just remember how to fight a war. If you forget even that, then you are gonna get your ass fired… Get to the point. If you want to talk about old times, we can chat all you want in our graves.」

「I will do just that then— back to the topic, which faction do you think is behind that harassment last night?」

「The rising something faction. It's always the side lacking in numbers that does something like this. They might be working together with the Remeon faction too.」

「That should be it. But practically speaking, it will be a problem if they keep up this nightly harassment. The troops will lose sleep, and more critically—」

「— The horses will be a problem. Not knowing when the next attack will come would grind away the nerves of the horses. No matter how well trained a horse is, it will be no different from a beast if it gets pushed beyond its limits.」

「We have to deal with this before it gets too late. Is it fine to leave it to the young ones?」

「You think it's not? What will you do then?」

「If possible, strike the source. There will be no end to this if we keep defending.」

「Good idea, I like it. However, it is difficult to execute. Those fellows will hole themselves in a hill with their back to the forest. It is possible to attack their base, it's just hard… Furthermore, they are only harassing us at night in small numbers. By slipping near our base under the cover of night, and shoot at bright areas once they get into Air Rifle range. Their attack will be successful if they just land a hit on a man or horse.」

Yorunzaf mimicked the motion of firing a wind gun as he explained. His adjutant stroked his beard.

「Since we can't cut off the source, we have to address the symptoms. That will be increasing patrols or setting up base at a high ground that can't be easily sniped from afar. Although both methods will just play into the enemy's hand of increasing the burden on the soldiers.」

「Their harassment might not be limited to shooting. They will probably use all sorts of tricks from henceforth. The viciousness of their methods would depend on the personality of their commander.」

「Let's drag the Remeon faction down with us. We can harass them in the same way, and pretend that the Rising Sun Regiment did it. If it works, we might steer the fight into a two on one situation.」

「I'm fine with that, but do we really want to do that? If we did that, the Rising Sun will respond with the same tactic. It will create a vicious cycle with all parties doubting each other. Not only would the efficiency of our search decrease, it will affect the negotiations once we find the Emperor too.」

「I never thought I would hear you worry about tying up loose ends after a war… we have grown old, General.」

「Don't look down the horizon. Your habit of taunting others is the same as always. I sometimes wonder why I hadn't lop off your head yet.」

General Yorunzaf said with a shrug, then leaned back on the table with his head looking up:

「… Anyway, we have to give up on that for now. Considering the threat of the Kioka, it will be difficult to keep up the search for long. We will use your methods to make do in the meantime. It's a good chance to teach the younglings in our unit that in war, things won't go as they wish.」

「That’s not like you at all. The correctness from a military standpoint aside, we are being played without retaliating. Doesn’t that make you mad?」

「I’m speechless by how you can be so combative at times. You still remember that I’m an Igsem, right? If you can’t, then try to recall. Just once a year will be enough.」

「The same blood flows in you and the Field Marshal’s veins is the biggest joke in all 900 years of the Empire’s history.」

When he heard that, General Yorunzaf’s stomach quivered, as he squeezed out a quiet laugh from the depths of his throat.

「That’s true.」

Chapter 4

The Person The Battlefield Was Set Up For

Hiding in their base during the day, and doing all sorts of harassment to the Igsem camp at night— Torway's group did that for five days.

Starting off by shooting at the enemy's horses from long range with Air Rifles, they also set a small fire upwind from the enemy's base, sent riders banging gongs around the enemy camp, cover the horses drinking trench with mud— they execute every idea they had within their ethical limits and manpower constraints. This slowed the Igsem faction's progress significantly. But on the dawn of the sixth day, Matthew started having doubts.

「... I know that this is a plan I proposed and now isn't the time, but is this really fine? We are just hindering others without making any progress on the search. We did slow the Igsem faction down, but maybe we are just lowering the chances of finding the Emperor...?」

After performing non constructive harassment day after day, it was natural to feel uneasy. Torway knew how Matthew felt, and shook his head firmly:

「Ma-kun, that's wrong. Ik-kun said that having the Emperor isn't a necessary condition to stop the coup. This is our advantage, and we are making full use of it.」

「? What do you mean?」

「If we assume that our victory condition is the same as the Igsem faction, which is to 『secure the Emperor』, then this plan would be ineffective. Hindering the opponent at the expense of stopping one's search, the best result we can get is if we negate each other— But that isn't so. It's not necessary for us to find the Emperor, and

harassing the Igsem will help the efficiency of the Remeon faction. Based on our victory condition, this is a shrewd move.」

After spending quite a bit of effort to think it though, the slightly plump youth nodded cautiously:

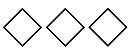
「… I see, you are right. Our victory condition is 『either us or the Remeon faction securing the Emperor.』 In order to meet that condition, we just need to make sure the Igsem don't find His Majesty. From the start, we didn't need to be tied to the idea of searching by ourselves.」

「Yes! In this situation, the disadvantage to the Igsem faction is as good as an advantage to us, so I think we just need to focus on hindering them.」

「This is the answer by elimination. It's hard to search at night, but if we mobilize our forces in the day, we might be attacked by cavalry. The only consistent actions we can take is to keep up the nightly harassment.」

Feeling relieved after understanding this, Matthew sighed deeply. Torway patted his shoulder encouragingly, then muttered something that was on Matthew's mind too:

「… But if big brother knows what strategy we are using, he will laugh at us.」



But the truth is, his brother's group couldn't spare the effort of laughing at others. As the Remeon faction's unsearched area dwindled down, Sarihasrag's unit in the southern part of the province had combed the area tirelessly, but had not yield any results.

「… Damn it! Where is he hiding!?」

When he personally led the search on a prospective village that didn't yield any results, the eldest son of the Remeon house kicked

down a tree in frustration. Sushuraf who was usually tasked with soothing his brother fell into deep silence this time too.

「We have searched all the large villages, and had thoroughly asked the residents for news! So why can't we find any traces of that fox!」

「… Calm down, big brother. Our encirclement is getting tighter, it is just a matter of time now.」

「That's the problem, we can't afford to waste time here! We have to conclude this coup before the Kioka realize our internal strife!」

Sarihasrag turned to his brother and smirk his lips.

「The search itself has been progressing smoothly, and we have checked all the suspicious places.」

「Indeed, in the past few days, we have fewer clashes with the other factions. Those bastards probably made less progress than us.」

「I heard there is a suspicious unit causing mischief at night, so they are probably dragging each other down. That's fine, as long as they don't get in our way—」

「Major!」

A shout interrupted their conversation, Sarihasrag wiped his irked expression away and turned to his subordinate. The aura around him had been the same since birth, but he had learned restraint now.

「What is it?」

「Sir! The village chief wish to speak with you!」

「Village chief...? I understand, lead the way.」

He answered with a nod and followed his subordinate. No matter how anxious he was, he had to curry favor with the locals. Their behavior here would directly affect the reputation of the Remeon faction. They had just searched all the buildings and even pried open

their floors, so they had to take care not to earn the ire of the residents.

The village had led a few chaperones to the southern end of the village. There was a plaza here where the villagers could gather, and there were even traveling merchants making use of this chance to set up stalls.

The village chief was old, but beside him was a woman even older than him. He was a bit surprised, but Sarihasrag still stood up straight in front of them.

「I'm army Major Sarihasrag Remeon, how may I be of service?」

「Thank you for seeing us. Pardon me for being forward, but we have a request.」

「What is it?」

「We would like to send her to a 『Home』. This old lady had no one to depend on… As you can see, she don't have much time left.」

The village chief looked toward the old lady as he told Sarihasrag quietly. Sarihasrag was a little surprised, but understood what the village chief meant. He was requesting for the blockade to be eased for the old lady to travel.

A religious facility known as the 「Home of Hospice」 were set up all around the Empire, a place where people who felt their days were numbered would gather. People who had no one to depend on were permitted to live there. Many priests from the Alderah Cult were based there to help visitors find peace in their final moments.

「I see, how many of you will be going?」

「Four. These three young men will take turns to push the wheelchair. It will be a tough journey if there are too few of them.」

Sarihasrag nonchalantly observed the people behind the village chief. The small and frail old lady and a the buff young men couldn't

be the Emperor and Trisnai in disguise. After confirming that, he nodded in agreement.

「Alright, I will arrange for your passage. If I recall correctly, there's a 『Home of Hospice』… close by to the southeast.」

As their search extended that far, the military had grasp the locations of the hospice too. The village chief nodded:

「That is so.」

「Understood. We can't spare the manpower to escort you, but I will order my men to tighten the security around this area. You might be halted by our forces on your journey there, but it won't be any problem if you state your reasons plainly— Madam, may you journey in peace.」

Sarihasrag saluted after saying that, and the old lady mumbled something. 「Thank you.」 The wind sprite on her knees said on its mistress' behalf.

A short time later, a large group came to send her off and say their final farewells to the old lady. When the group set off, the crowd remained behind to watch them leave.

「Grandma Yumari is finally going 『home』, huh… She used to be our village chief too.」

「What about Grandpa Tsugu who went there earlier? He's probably still alive? Maybe they will meet there.」

「That's true. Oh, and that guy who is bandaged all over…」

「Don't be stupid, it's impossible for them to meet. Even if he is still alive, that's a contagious disease…」

Two men whispered to each other. Sarihasrag unconsciously stopped in his track. Intrigued by their conversation for some reason, the eldest son of the Remeon house turned towards them:

「… Hey, you two over there.」

His sharp gaze made them shivered. He wasn't fazed and continued as he walked over:

「Can you tell me the details of your conversation?」

「Huh! Ah…」 「No, that's…」

「Someone went 『home』 earlier, right? What do you mean the old lady won't get to meet him?」

「That's… because he is seriously ill.」 「T-That's right, he's probably dead.」

Sarihasrag shook his head as he glared at the two suspicious individuals:

「That's not it, correct? You said 『even if he is still alive』. Dead or alive, you don't think the old lady will get to meet him, right?」

「……」 「… T-That's…」

「I want to know the reason why you think so. Let me ask again, why is that?」

When they heard him ordered with a tone that left no room for negotiation, the two men looked awkwardly at each other. They are hiding something— Sarihasrag was certain of it, and the village chief interjected:

「Major, please don't bully the young ones.」

「Ah, pardon me. I don't mean to harass them.」

The eldest son of the Remeon house apologized curtly, but his eyes were still locked on to the two men before him. The village chief said with a sigh:

「It's only natural that they are hesitant to speak, this is a topic that people are reluctant to bring up… In principle, a 『home』 will accept all people on the verge of death indiscriminately. However, there are exceptions that aren't easy to speak of.」

「Contagious disease carriers?」

Sarihasrag said it clearly. The village chief nodded with a heavy mood:

「That is correct. Seems like there is no need to hide anymore, I will tell you the truth…」

The village chief slowly recounted what happened. According to him— some time ago, two people visited this village. One of them was a thin man in pilgrimage attire, the other was a bedridden man covered in bandages. He seemed unable to move by himself, and was lying in the back of a wagon when he arrived at the village. <TL: 巡礼服>

「Because of their strange appearances, I thoroughly questioned their purpose for coming here… And as I expected, that man was a contagious disease carrier who couldn't stay in his old home.」

As he listened, Sarihasrag felt a chill creep up his back. Since he started the search in the Dafuma Province, he felt something click for the first time when he heard what the village chief said.

「I can't let him stay here, of course, so I introduce them to a facility. There are few places that will take in such patients, and only one in the vicinity. So I gave them directions there…」

The village chief started getting vague, and the eldest son of the Remeon house held his shoulders firmly:

「In short, that bandaged man was sent to a treatment facility, which isn't the 『home』 that old lady went to. And that facility is built in a place where others won't go near.」

「… That's right. I never told you about this… I hope you will forgive me.」

The village chief said with a groan. According the the taboos of the Alderah Cult, ostracizing contagious disease carriers was a sin as it went against the spirit of indiscriminate charity. However, there would always be places in some provinces that gave silent consent to

such behaviour. Leaving aside the righteousness of doing so, the fact was, they had no other choice if they want to prevent the spread of terrible contagious diseases.
<TL: 博愛精神>

「I beg your forgiveness…」

The village chief hung his head low after giving his confession. However, Sarihasrag wasn't interested in his feelings of guilt, and was excited about finding a credible lead. He pressed the village chief:

「Can you tell me where that treatment facility is?」

「A-As you wish… But like I mentioned just now, it's not marked on the map, and even the locals don't frequent there…」

The village chief stammered. And finally, a smile appeared on the corner of Sarihasrag's lips:

「That's how it is, Sushu. Isn't that just swell?」

His brother nodded at his gaze. The feeling of catching the tail of one's prey made these brothers ecstatic, and their jade eyes shone in the same way.

After getting the information from the village chief, the Remeon brothers set off with their unit, and a traveling merchant who was doing business at a corner of the plaza stood up slowly.

「— The two gentlemen over there, excuse me.」

「Hmm? You mean us?」

The peddler was talking to the duo who got questioned by Sarihasrag earlier. He approached with a pleasant smile, and took out a map:

「I didn't mean to eavesdrop, but I happen to overhear your talk with that soldier… if it's not too much trouble, can you mark the location of that treatment facility on this map?」

「H-Huh…? Did you really heard us? That place takes in people with contagious diseases. Why would you want to know their location?」

「It's a good business opportunity. Since there is a treatment facility, there must be a director there. They take in a lot of patients, and will need supplies. Even more so for a place where normal merchants will avoid.」

「… I don't mind telling you, but after you go there, stay away from our village for the time being.」

「That's right. You are free to catch those diseases, but don't drag us in.」

After the two men warned him, they marked the spot on his map. After receiving the marked map, the peddler faced the two of them with a face of satisfaction:

「Thank you. It's not much of a gift—」

He pointed to the open air stall behind and said with a big smile:

「— I will give you all the goods in my stall. It isn't much, but please share it generously with everyone.」

「What?」 「What did you—」

「Take care, and farewell.」

The peddler turned and ran to a small wagon after saying that. He loosened the rope tying the horse to the wagon, and rode on the horse that was freed from its burden. Before the people around him could even take a second breath, he had left all his tools of the trade behind, and charged off.

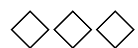
「A treatment facility that takes in patients with contagious diseases? This might be a blindspot, General Yorunzaf……!」

… Each faction had split up into small teams to search the area. As they continued their sweep, the search zone shrinks gradually. A strong lead that points to the whereabouts of the Emperor— and

the fact that two factions got hold of this information at almost the same time.

The situation was as good as two hunters rushing towards a common prey in the center.

The condition for a final battle had been met.



The Remeon faction suddenly set off from their camp to the south. When Torway and Matthew received this report from their scouts, they looked at each other blankly.

「… What do you think?」

「They probably… got hold of a clue to His Majesty's whereabouts. Since they mobilized such a large force, big brother must have found a strong lead.」

「If that is so, then his actions are too careless! Such an obvious mobilization would definitely agitate the other factions. Since we noticed, the Igsem faction definitely did too, and will hinder them before they begin their search. If it was me, I would act more conspicuously.」

「Yes, I feel the same… So I think that is just a bold misdirection. Big brother is trying to draw the Igsem faction and us to the south, and use their remaining forces to search another key area.」

「I can understand such a move. But where might that be?」

「I don't know. But I know what we should do. Since the Remeon faction found the Emperor, we should help them.」

The slightly plump youth concurred with a nod, then laid out his map:

「Then we should watch the Igsem faction's reaction carefully. How will they move?」

「If they get drawn to the south by that diversion, then we won't get the chance to do anything…」

「The problem is if they didn’t get tricked. That’s tough… If that happens, where should we send our forces?」

Matthew crossed his arms in deep thought. The youth continued:

「The possibility of the Remeon faction failing, would be they getting attacked by the Igsem faction who saw through that diversion. To prevent that from happening, we need to stop the Igsem faction right now, but…」

「Stopping them… But they are cavalry units. In this terrain, any witless attack will just get repelled— No, it won’t even be a fight. They had no reason to engage us, and will just continue their pursuit of the Remeon faction.」

「Then, what about following the Remeon faction and acting as their escorts?」

「We need to follow the unit going to the 『strong prospective place』, and not the south diversion unit, correct? We have no idea where that unit is. If they sent the battalion in their northeastern base out as a diversion, that meant the two battalion out on search duty will head to that 『strong prospective place』.」

They didn’t have any clue about the present location A of the Remeon unit, which was heading to an unknown location B. This was the only downside of their strategy of hiding in their own base.

Leaving Matthew who was in a mental deadlock aside, Torway continued thinking:

「Then… We can only deduce it. According to geological constraints, the progress of their search and the personality of big brother— and adding other conditions, we might deduce where the 『strong prospective place』 is to a certain extent. We don’t have to know the exact location, and can just head for the general vicinity, then send out scouts along the way to figure out the place…」

「That's something Ikuta will say… instead of playing blind chess, this is closer to gambling.」

「That's true. But our options is to 『do nothing』 or 『make a bet』, right?」

「You are using that move…」

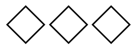
The youth presented two choices with a clear answer, which was too combative for his style. Matthew wiped away the cold sweat on his forehead with the back of his palm, and made up his mind.

「… We have no choice, let's go for broke. On second thought, our chances aren't that low. Captain Garciev is watching over me.」

Grabbing the compass under his uniform, Matthew put up a strong front. He turned back together with Torway and looked at the pioneers bustling behind them.

「In that case, we might finally put this to use. The trump card against cavalry— how's the progress?」

On his urging, one of the soldiers showed him a completed product. The two of them inspected it carefully, and nodded as it met the standard they requested.



Under the gloomy sky, soldiers marched in ranks with steel colored wind gun barrels resting on their shoulders.

This was the Remeon brothers' unit, two battalion of windgunners— After discounting the forces they mobilized for a diversion, this was all the forces they could muster.

「Tch, this terrain is really annoying. Only the cavalry gets to show off, while we can't even walk properly.」

Sarihasrag grumbled in the middle of the group. Due to the skirmishes with the Igsem faction, their two battalion actually numbered less than 900. Sushuraf beside him nodded in agreement:

「This should be the last day we have to bear with this lack of freedom. If we can secure His Majesty, then the matter will be over. That forest is just around 10 km away, big brother.」

「Yes, it's our win when we reach that forest, I hope no one gets in our way before that.」

「The unit we sent to the south should be able to hoodwink them. Whether they fall for it or not, they will need some time to grasp our location, and is unlikely they will—」

At that moment, a loud gong interrupted their conversation. A rider section scouting the outskirts had sounded the alarm.

As the troops turned rowdy, Sarihasrag swept his gaze around the area in shock:

「Enemy attack…? Are you kidding me, I don't even see a scout out there!」

「Two, two, one— A large cavalry unit is approaching! Big brother, square formation!」

On the orders of the Sarihasrag who was the commander-in-chief, the soldiers started forming up.

With a forty men platoon on each side, the four sides formed a 160-men square formation. Four such squares were formed side to side. The geometrically sound formation had been mathematically proven to be effective against charges.

「All units, fix bayonets! First rank, raise your pikes!」

That wasn't all, their square formation was armed with pikes this time. Of the three ranks that formed each side of the formation, the 13 men in front held 2 meter long pikes instead of their windgun affixed with bayonets. They were primitive weapons that didn't even have a steel tip.

「Raise the tip to 15 degrees! Dig the end of the pike into the ground, and don't let go! This is your lifeline!」

The eldest son of the Remeon house cautioned loudly, and wasn't panicking anymore. If the enemy attacks, they just need to engage them. Including this assault, they had prepared countermeasures for everything that might happen. Ever since his defeat to those rookie Warrant Officers, he had cast aside his arrogant attitude and made adequate preparations.

「They are here! From the northeast, prepare to fire!」

The enemy appeared on the horizon, and the horde of cavalry kicked up a cloud of dust on their approach. The soldiers stared at the enemy, and gulped as they aimed down their sights.

The cavalry led by Fierce General Yorunzaf charged through the storm of dust. They were 600 strong, and also all the forces the Igsem faction could mobilize right now.

It wasn't a coincidence that they caught hold of the enemy's position, this was clearly the result of their strategy. On the next morning after Torway's group started their harassment, General Yorunzaf knew that his work efficiency will fall, and made adjustments to account for that.

Simply put, he was riding the coattails of the other faction's search. He sent soldiers disguised as traveling merchants into villages and towns to steal the Remeon faction's intel, and used them in his own search efforts. For the Igsem faction that had the advantage in mobility, this was super effective. They would always be a step behind since they had to depend on stolen data, but they made up for it with their speed.

「We are 600 m away from the square formation! The enemy appears to be holding up pikes!」

「Oh, how nostalgic! It reminds me of when I just joined the army, when pikemen were still an active army vocation!」

「Are we going to charge? The pikes should be a countermeasure against Jump Cavalry!」

「Don’t ask stupid questions! Aside from charging, you lot don’t know any other methods!」

He lashed out pointedly, which made his men laugh. As their excitement was at their peak right before a battle, the old general drew his saber and announced the start of a deadly battle:

「All units, draw blades! The enemy is right before us! Ram into them with all that you have got!」

「「「「「「「Sir, yes, sir!」」」」」」」

With that shout as a signal, the cavalry spread out from file formation into horizontal ranks. As they charge towards the four square formation, a tsunami would be an apt way to describe them, displaying the violence of speed combined with mass. They were the strongest soldier type on the battlefield in history, and bared their fangs with the legendary Fierce General leading them.

「「「「「「「Uwoooahhhhh!」」」」」」」

Charging through the hail of bullets, the cavalry reached the square formation with a howl. The vanguard responsible for leaping into the enemy formation was well trained horseman that embodies the name of the 「Jump Cavalry」, all of them capable of jumping clear of swords and spears.

However— the enemy had pikes this time, and they couldn’t jump over it. They knew that very well, so what should they do?

The conclusion was, they wouldn’t do anything different. They only yearn to be faster stronger, wilder.

The makeshift pikes blocked the charge. The pikes caught between the earth and the body thrown against it didn’t depend on the strength of the one bracing it, and could take the full weight of the impact. The fresh blood spraying them and the screams of pain in their ears made the soldiers holding the pikes lose control of their bladder in fear. The pike defence work— but they weren’t aware of this fact, and were overwhelmed in horror. Stunned by the horrible



fact that the enemy didn't slow their insane speed despite knowing they would get impaled!

「「「「「「「Woaahhhh!」」」」」」」

Not only did they turn a blind eye to the terrible state of their comrades, the cavalry behind even used this chance to continue charging. Their comrades in front had already covered the tip of those damn pikes with their body. They pushed these lumps of meat from behind, and the pikes broke in half, disabling the anti cavalry equipment. Most of the makeshift pikes prepared by the Remeon faction was rendered useless in the first wave of attack.

With no pikes blocking their way, the cavalry charge over the corpse of their comrades and pouced gleefully into the enemy's base. Realizing a massacre was about to begin, the soldiers from the Remeon faction started screaming in horror.

「—T-This is madness!」

Sarihasrag who was in the middle of the square formation described the enemy cavalry surging forth with just these words.

That was only natural. The pike he prepared was a defence meant to scare off the Jump Cavalry. The purpose was to give a psychological deterrent, and not meant to fully defend against the full wrath of a cavalry charge. The pikes breaking was to be expected.

Both men and horses fear death. This was natural instinct that was difficult to overcome, and many tactics were built on this assumption. However Yorunzaf Igsem didn't have such fear. They only know how to charge madly in reckless abandon. They love to trample, ravage, and lose themself in this destructive torrent.

And of course— This was the true nature of the Jump Cavalry under Fierce General Yorunzaf's command. In the end, their outstanding horsemanship was just a decoration. Since the founding of the unit half a century ago, their superior officer only ask for one

quality from his men. Which was courage, or in another word, madness. Just the abnormality of performing insane action in the face of danger.

「Keep your chin up, big brother! If we don't take any countermeasures, our square formation will get overrun!」

「……!」

His brother's warning snapped Sarihasrag back to reality, and he quickly searched for a way to get out of this situation. But the more he looked at it, the more lost he got. Even if he wanted to make a tactical retreat, there were only plains and hills around them, and it would take too much time to move while they were in square formation. If they showed an opening like that, the enemy would definitely aim for it.

「Checkmate」 flashed across his mind. What the hell! He resisted with his raging emotions, but he couldn't think of any methods to turn this inevitable defeat around—

The cavalry ran through the formation like a violent tempest. They turned around at the opposite end of the formation, and started charging again, and the gaps in the four square formation started widening with each attack. The enemy was in a terrible state, and couldn't even retaliate, which made Yorunzaf clicked his tongue with dissatisfaction as he rode with his men.

「How unsightly, how unsightly! Aren't you losing more and more terribly!? If you have the guts to stage a coup, then don't sully the Remeon's name on the battlefield! It makes us look like fools for treating you seriously!」

「「「「「「「Woooaaahh!」」」」」」」

The old general roared as he craved for an even more intense battle. The cavalry with him also let out a feral yell, yearning more violence and blood. The madness that one man tapped on as his

source of life had infected the entire unit. And now, they were a hellish army that would charge into the end of hell on his command.

His way of living was the same as his time during active duty. The achievement of One Armed Igsem had always been earned through the same madness of the battlefield.

—Yorunzaf Igsem is not to be promoted to the General ranks.

The one who decided that was the previous Igsem head. And so, even though Yorunzaf accomplished much more than others, the highest rank he reached during his active time was Brigadier General.

Even the rank of Brigadier General was only given when he was about to retire. He spent most of his military career as a company grade and field grade officer. The military granted him an honorary rank generously, but that was after he retired from the frontlines. But Yorunzaf had no complaints. As he loved living in the frontlines, the safety of headquarters for high ranking generals would just cause him pain.

Yorunzaf knew very well why he was kept away from the military's high command. He was too passionate about war, and would even lead his men down a hellish warpath. If such a person was promoted to the top management of the military, it would twist the very nature of the organization. A combative commander would turn the view that 'war is a necessary evil' on its head.

The incident when he lost his left arm made him understand just how hopeless he was. During a cavalry charge, a projectile falling from the sky hit Yorunzaf in the shoulder.

His arm wasn't severed, and if he retreated and right then to treat his wounds, he could probably save his arm. His adjutant also advised him to do so.

But he didn't— because the enemy was right before him, and they were really strong. It would be a pity to flee at this crucial moment,

and he couldn't bring himself to do so. Who knew when they would meet again!?

So, Yorunzaf did so crude first aid to stop the bleeding, then joined in the fray until the very end. When he heard the doctor diagnose that his left arm had to be amputated, he nodded understandably with a 「as I expected～」. He valued the fleeting moment of exhilaration in battle over saving his left arm— for him, this was a choice he would make without any hesitation.

「Fu—」

Everytime he recalled this, the old general couldn't help laughing at himself. Born in the Igsem house that was the incarnation of military order, he lost an arm because he loved fighting too much, and couldn't wield the signature dual blade of the Igsem anymore. The entire matter was like the heavens branding him with 「you are a heretic」.

Yorunzaf knew very well how accurate that evaluation was— Which was why he felt so gleeful about it. Even though this was a civil war between fellow imperial soldiers, that didn't quell his enjoyment of the fight at all.

The past or the future didn't matter. Only the war happening in the present.

「—Fuhaha…!」

However— the old general who had lived more intensely than anyone else had yet to receive one thing from war. The swan song of a warrior that should be given to him before his retirement.

「It seems that the day of my death is still far—!」

Yorunzaf gave the order for his dispersed unit to form up. The enemy unit was at their limits of maintaining a square formation. They would last just one more charge, or two at the most. Then he would finish things up by accepting the surrender of the enemy commander.

「— Hmm?」

The old general was already thinking about the end of the battle when he felt a prickly sensation on his neck. He remembered this feeling. He felt the same thing when he lost his arm, this was a warning from his instinct as a warrior.

Yorunzaf shift his gaze from his subordinates preparing for their charge and swept the surroundings. He looked at the far horizon beyond the square formation in front of him— and found it. The source of his prickly sensation came from a small ovalish hill about two km wide, right behind the Remeon faction.

「Oh— that's right. Still being far away is nonsense.」

The glee in his heart made the old general raise the corner of his lips— How could he not be? A guest that would make this battle more meaningful has arrived.

「This is already too close. You all can send death from so far away…!」

「—This is…」

Did he make it in time or was he too late? The scene before him made it hard for Torway to decide.

Looking from the top of the hill, the situation was clearly one sided. The four square formations were in shambles, and countless corpses laid in the open plains. The Igsem cavalry that made this terrible scene were forming up some distance away, ready to deal a final blow once they were ready.

With the battle nearing its end, it was hard to say for certain if his two older brothers were safe. But the fight is still on, there is still a chance to turn the tide— after making that conclusion, the jade eyed youth gulped bitterly and made up his mind.

「… Deploy the third unorthodox square formation! Commence support fire on the spot!」

The soldiers started executing his orders, running down the slope to their posts. At this moment, one of the men tasked with observing the enemy shouted loudly:

「E-Enemy unit is moving at high speed! They went around the Remeon faction's square formation and is coming our way!」

Postponing the fatal blow they were about to deal to the square formation before them, Yorunzaf turned towards the new enemy forces that appeared on the hill. Rushing in to save an allied unit on the verge of defeat by laying down support fire from a hill— the situation was strangely similar to their previous encounter.

He could ignore them and take care of the Remeon faction first, but doing so would expose them to enemy fire from above. Considering the possibility that even more enemy might be hiding behind the hill, it would be prudent to destroy that windgun unit first. The old general made that decision.

「General! The enemy went halfway down the hill and formed a square formation there!」

「On the slope? Oh…!」

Yorunzaf was a little surprised. To maximize the advantage of the high ground, it would be better for them to wait on top of the hill. Horses would inevitably slow down when charging uphill, lowering the impact of the cavalry charge, and prolonging the time for them to shoot.

What was the reason they gave up on this advantage and formed a square formation on the slope? After pondering about it, the old general came up with an answer:

「… That formation will allow them to commit more than half of their soldiers into the shootout!」

Because of the limits of the formation, less than half the members of a square formation could fire on the enemy attacking from any

one direction. Even if the soldiers on the other side wanted to fight, they would be blocked by the bodies of their comrades.

However, the square formation on the slope was different. Because of the difference in elevation, the soldiers behind would have an unobstructed line of fire.

This would be an effective defence against the cavalry charge, and at the same time, maximize the effectiveness of Air Rifles— the enemy commander was greedily chasing two birds with one stone, and was a failure in Yorunzaf's eyes.

「I want to compliment the amount of thought you put into this— but that's a bad move. Unfortunately, we are not incompetent wild boars that can only charge in a straight line!」

On the old general's instruction, the galloping cavalry swiftly change direction from going straight for the enemy on the hill to going around to their back.

From this moment forth, the square formation on the slope lost its purpose. All the soldiers could only shoot together if the enemy charge them from the front, but if their opponent scaled the hill from the back, this tactic will work against them. The enemy would gain the high ground, and the windgunners on the back row would have a harder time firing compared to being on the plains.

「Enemy cavalry is flanking us! They plan to go around to the back of the hill !」

Torway who was standing in the middle of the unorthodox square formation could see what his subordinate was reporting.

「……」

The youth didn't move. If he continued waiting, the enemy that ran up the hill would charge down with destructive force, aided by the pull of gravity. Despite knowing that, he remained unmoved.

As the time passed agonizingly, his anxious subordinate asked in a trembling voice:

「I-Is it time yet, battalion commander?」

「Not yet!」

The youth was adamant on waiting. The riders trailing behind the cavalry was still within sight. That meant they could still see this place— so he didn't move. If he didn't wait until the enemy was completely gone from his sights, they might see through his goal.

He could feel his heart racing even faster as Torway ran simulations and calculated— The time needed for the enemy cavalry to reach the other side of the hill. How long they needed to change direction and spread out in their ranks. Considering the tactics he was using, he had little buffer time. The thought of that made him stood up in anxiety.

However— right before the limits of his patience was reached, the enemy was completely gone from sight. With the hill blocking the view, the next few minutes would allow both sides to take action without being seen. The youth shouted at the top of his lungs:

「Switch to pincer attack mode! Change formation now, hurry!」

Free to move again, the soldiers frantically started taking action. Torway ran alongside them.

This window was less than two minutes. The action they take during this time will decide the outcome of this battle.

When we went around to the other side of the hill and looked up, Yorunzaf frowned:

「—What? No ambushes here?」

He clicked his tongue in disappointment. Contrary to his expectations, aside from the tip of the square formation, he couldn't see any signs of the enemy on the hill top. Which meant the wind gunners he saw earlier was the entire enemy forces. One square formation— which meant one company of around 200, which was much lesser than last time.

「The tip of the square formation extends to the hilltop. They are trying to move up to engage our detour, huh—」

「We won't give them the chance.」

Yorunzaf said without any hesitation, and started charging after correcting the approach path. The top of the hill was about 600 m away. He could imagine the panic faces of the enemy on the other side of the hill rushing up the steep slope.

「Spread out the ranks! The slope isn't too steep, so don't slow down! Charge them with maximum force!」

「「「「「「「Wooahhh!」」」」」」」

The hellish cavalry charged with a howl. The hail of bullets meant to stop them never came. The enemy was probably insisting on holding with their square formation, and only a portion of the soldiers reached the hilltop.

They were almost at the peak. A few seconds before they reached, the faces of the enemy forming a corner of the square formation appeared before them. Surprisingly, their faces didn't show any signs of giving up, as they raised their guns with a determined face.

The hellish cavalry found their courage praiseworthy. Were the troops on the other side of the hill wearing the same expression? Their punishment for their tactical mishap was incoming, but they planned to battle until their very last—

「……?」「Huh… ah!」「What—」「Ahh—?」

However—when the cavalry reached the top of the hill, the enemy's reaction was completely different from what they expected. With the riders almost on top of them, their opponent toss aside their windgun and lay prone onto the ground with something like a short table on their backs.

The hooves stomped onto the turtle shell like things all over the place. It was probably made with exceptionally tough wood, and could withstood the stampede of the horses, which continued on

their way after going through that area. They didn't have any target to swing their blades at. The riders charged over the heads of the enemy with stupefied faces— and the next instant, all of them were surprised by the scene on the other side of the hill.

The square formation was gone. The formation that should have stretched to the other end of the hill was missing,

「T-This is…」

A few quick witted men thought of the answer. The 40 men taking the postures of turtles weren't a corner of the square formation, but an isolated group used to give the appearance that there was a square formation. That was why they didn't have any will to fight. After luring the cavalry to charge at them, they had accomplished their mission.

「Ah—」 「Ugh…!」

At this point, the hellish riders finally saw the trap in its entirety. The square formation was gone— but the enemy was still here.

They formed up in neat rows to the left and right of the charging path. They set up a cross fire on the slope their enemy charging down, making sure their line of fire wouldn't hit each other. Keeping some distance from the open space that now served as a hunting ground, they waited silently for their prey to rush into their trap.

This was like a welcome party for the cavalry's triumphant return. The only difference was the nature of the gift presented to the cavalry by the audience. It wasn't compliments or blessings, but curses in the form of a hail of bullets—

「Volley fire, begin!」

With the signal of the youth, the sound of countless air explosion reverberated in the air.

It was the start of a one sided hunt. The bullets fired from the muzzle hit the galloping riders from their flanks, taking the lives of men and horses. A charging cavalry couldn't change its direction

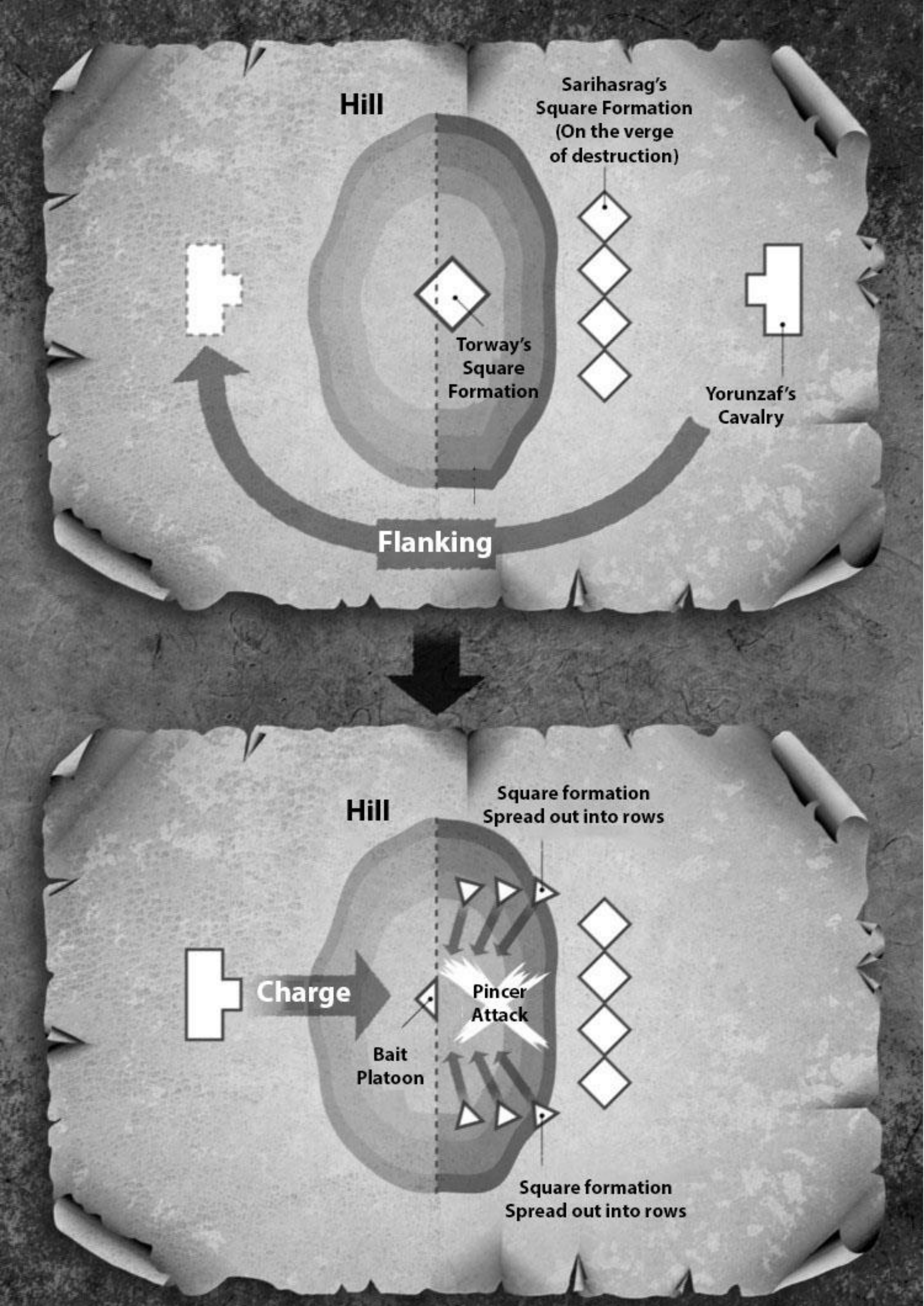
suddenly, and their greatest weapon was turned on them. They had no choice but to endure the bullet hail fired at their sides.

And worst of all, they couldn't relay what they saw to the riders behind them. All of them could only follow the leading elements and charge ahead.

On the other hand, Torway's unit didn't even need to aim, and just need to keep firing at the enemy caught between their crossfire. They focused slowly on their mechanical execution, with no regards for the clash that their enemy was hoping for.

「Phew…!」

The youth continued squeezing his trigger, executing the movements he ordered his men to perform. 「Remeon of the Gun」 used his precise shooting to tell the crazed legendary cavalry what ice cold slaughter was—



Hill
Sarihasrag's
Square Formation
(On the verge
of destruction)
Torway's
Square
Formation
Yorunzaf's
Cavalry
Flanking
Hill
Square formation
Spread out into rows
Charge
Pincer
Attack
Bait
Platoon
Square formation
Spread out into rows

In the middle of the ranks that was getting shot down from the sides, Yorunzaf Igsem was shivered with joy at the bold tenacity of the enemy commander that beat his expectations.

The enemy on the hill, the square formation on the slope, and the small amount of soldiers that were visible at the hill top— all this was just a disguise to make him think the square formation extends all the way to the other side of the hill, a set up to trick the foolish enemy to charge into this trap.

Realizing the dire situation he was in, Yorunzaf laughed with extreme excitement:

「Fu— Fuhahahaha! A trick to take me down, huh! To lure the One Armed Igsem into the trap of pride and fame, and then hunt me down like a beast!?」

In the endless hail of bullets, the old general didn't even need to brace himself again. He didn't have the option of slowing down— stopping here will just extend the amount of time they were targeted. If he didn't want that to happen, the only way was to charge straight out of their range and regroup.

At this point, Yorunzaf also realized that the enemy expected him to do just that.

「…? G-General! The enemy before us…!」

The old general's premonition proved true, the scene before him changed. The hopeless Remeon faction they cast aside— all the survivors of the square formation they destroyed were charging at them with reckless abandon. They didn't even form ranks, and were just charging ahead like rats forced into a corner.

Their commander probably realized that this was the last chance to turn the tide of battle, and launched an all out pincer offence with no regards for defence. What a decisive move— Acknowledging the grit of the enemy, Yorunzaf opened his blood red eyes wide:

「… Try me if you have the guts! This is a good day to die! My beloved partners in life, the beautiful twins of illogical and unreasonableness! Try to make me cry out loud in my death throe～～!」

「— Full speed ahead! Close in now, don't let those damn cavalry catch their breath!」

The only tunnel that leads out of death and defeat. The eldest son of the Remeon house led his wind gunners and charged towards the ray of hope that appeared unexpectedly.

In the corner of his mind, he thought about the square formation on the hill top that disappeared. A mirage that was gone in a matter of minutes. But the instant he saw that, Sarihasrag understood the identity and intent of the new unit. There was no way he could miss that.

Using the terrain of the hill, and a pincer attack with the third form of unorthodox square formation. A tactic their father Terushinha Remeon used to turn the tides against a superior Kioka cavalry. When Sarihasrag was a child, he pleaded his father who was reluctant to actively share his past exploit. He and his two brothers would listen to their father's tale with sparkling eyes .

「So you are using this move, Toruru…! You bastard who betrayed the Remeon house!」

Sarihasrag groaned with anger, jealousy and many other complicated emotions in his heart. His younger brother Sushuraf followed him closely, and the two pair of jade eyes watch the cavalry charging towards them through the bulletstorm.

「The cavalry is coming straight for us… Big brother, stay close to me.」

「Don't look down on me, Sushu. At times like this, you just need to say 『I will leave my back to you』.」

After the brief exchange between the Remeon brothers, they raised their guns fearlessly at their approaching foes.

Yorunzaf charged down the hill, Torway was in pursuit, and Sarihasrag engaged the charge. The three different movement intertwine and encroached each other— and created a big mess of chaos.

The windgunners launch a pincer attack on the charging cavalry from the front and back, and a suffocating melee battle erupted. Torway and Sarihasrag's units worked together as allies, and couldn't fire recklessly to avoid friendly fire. Yorunzaf aimed for this opening and attempted to break through. Knowing that they couldn't withstand another charge, the infantrymen refused to relent. They were no longer in formation, and engaged the enemy haphazardly.

「Ugh…!」

In a word, this was a swamp-like messy fight. Ironically, Torway was in the biggest trouble in this situation. His unit was proficient in sniping from a distance, and didn't have much experience with melee battles. Matthew was good in such a fight, but he wasn't here right now.

Torway had one company of 200 men with him. That wasn't the full extent of his forces, they just happened to be the one who encountered the enemy after splitting up. Taking into account the geological constraints and the criterias set by the officers in charge— they shortlisted the prospective places as much as possible, but they weren't as capable as the dark haired youth, and were left with three potential places.

Unable to shortlist any further, Torway and Matthew gave up on visiting just one spot, and divided their forces into three to scout the three places, judging that a company of 200 windgunners would be enough to provide effective support.

In the end, Torway's unit hit the mark. Maybe Captain Garciev's compass protected Matthew from guessing right. If that was true, then the youth was sincerely grateful. Since his precious friend didn't need to take part in this terrible battle, then he shouldn't hope for me— that's right, he shouldn't expect anything more.

「Uwahhh!」

He squat down in the nick of time to dodge a rider's saber— his luck had ran out, and he couldn't count on that anymore. Torway Remeon had to survive this dire situation with his own prowess!

「Protect battalion commander Torway!」 「Battalion commander, this way!」

His subordinates who were just as bad at melee fighting tried their best to protect their superior officer. He warned himself not to depend on them, but the youth's hands holding his gun kept shaking.

「Ha, ha…!」 「Torway, calm down! Observe your surroundings carefully!」

His partner Safi warned him. But he didn't have time to take a breather as his men gathered around to protect him. That made him more prominent to the enemy riders aiming to take out opposing commanders.

And as expected, three horsemen charged at him with bloodied sabers. The youth aimed his gun at them, but—

「… Ughh…!」

He couldn't aim properly. Not only was his hands trembling in fear, the enemy was too close. He could see their faces clearly. He had always avoided his reluctance to 「kill living beings」 by firing from afar, so melee battles were his weak point.

「Ughh… Ah…!」

He couldn't squeeze the trigger as the horsemen drew close. Two of them were chased off by his subordinates' covering fire, but the

last rider charged relentlessly. The youth stood stiffly as the horse charge right for him—

「Why are you just standing there, retard!」

A nostalgic admonishment came into his ears. A gunshot pierced the head of the horse at the same moment, saving Torway's life. He turned instinctively towards the direction of the voice, and saw his brothers standing there with solemn faces.

「B-Big brother…?」

「What brother!? If I didn't save you, you would have died! This is a freaking disgrace, your weak personality is incorrigible!」

The eldest son of the Remeon house ignored the entire situation for now and grabbed his baby brother by his collar:

「Your face still looks as naive as ever…! How many times do I need to tell you!? If you don't have the resolve to kill, then don't stand on the battlefield!」

Torway could only stare at his big brother that was raging at him. Sarihasrag's expression was beyond furious, and seemed bitter:

「Why won't you learn! I know you have the talent! And you did help me earlier! But— that's not the problem! It's here! In your chest! You don't have the heart to keep killing!」

The eldest brother hit his baby brother's chest with a shout. Torway still couldn't react, and Sushuraf who was watching quietly raised his voice when he detected danger:

「Big brother, it's the enemy! An entire horde!」

Sarihasrag unhanded his baby brother with a click of his tongue, then raised his wind gun in the direction Sushuraf was looking. He saw more than 20 horsemen charging towards him in ranks.

「Whose head do I need to reap for war merits〜〜!?」

Not just that, the hellish king with red flowing hair was amongst them. Loping off the head of the commander to end the battle—

Yorunzaf charged with this simple goal in mind. In contrast, the Remeon brothers had less than 30 men with them. It was the end of the road.

「Engage them, take formation—!」

Sarihasrag's order wasn't relayed completely. Because the horsemen started their charge with an ear shattering howl. The incarnation of violence assaulted them, trampling over the weak infantry. Their bodies flew like splinters as the horse knocked them aside—

「—Ah……」

And flew towards Torway who was standing there stiffly. His head was hit by the body of his subordinate, which shook the brain under his skull. He couldn't even keep himself conscious by gritting his teeth, as the youth descended into darkness.

「— If you can't squeeze the trigger during crucial moments, you won't be able to protect anything.」

I remember big brother's words as I lose myself in self loathing. Because his voice hurts me the most during this moment.

「You should be aware by now. The problem isn't your technique… You can't even fire on a beast that is trying to kill you.」

Sarihas-nii who shot the wolf kicked away its carcass from my feet annoyedly. Meanwhile, Sushu-nii quietly washed the bite wound on my ankle with water from his bottle.

「So stop thinking about joining the army, you are not suitable. There's no point insisting on being a soldier anyway. Since you are the third son, you can live in a way that suits you more.」

Be it his crude sarcastic words or the concern hidden under it, I couldn't respond to them. I hung my head low in silence, and Sushu-nii had already finished dressing my wound.

「If Dad makes a fuss, I will help you persuade him— Let’s go, Sushu. Carry that retard.」

My second brother carried me down the mountain trial with his broad back. Until we reached the foot of the mountain, Sarihas-nii who led the way kept kicking the ground unhappily. However— I noticed it. The loose rocks and slippery leaves were all gone after big brother walked passed it.

… Oh, I see. All sort of things were intertwined, and became so complicated.

Back then— my two elder brother must be filled with gentle kindness.

「—Toruru. You might not be suited to be a soldier.」

I remembered these words I heard under extreme fatigue and hunger. Because my teacher’s voice had never been more gentle.

「I had nurtured many soldiers in the military, but not once had I said 『you are not suited, so give up.』 Because they just need to make up for their weakness— that is my principle. Those who lack endurance need to run, those who can’t hit the target need to shoot, those who are insubordinate will be beaten until they listen. I sculpted many competent soldiers this way. Just like what I’m doing to you now.」

She then walked towards the small cage her gaze was on, and opened the locked gate— then picked up the hare trembling inside. The target I couldn’t shoot.

「… However, I don’t think your character is flawed. Despite being scolded, lashed, and not permitted to eat for three days, you still refuse to shoot this critter. Your gentle personality should be regarded as being praiseworthy instead.」

She looked sadly as I sat weakly on the grass. My heart was filled with guilt and didn’t say anything. I would definitely cry if I relaxed one bit.

「As the shooting consultant of the Remeon house, teaching you is one of my duties… However, will I really be performing my duty if I nurture you into a competent soldier? If I twist your soul and raise you into a bastard who will shoot anyone without a second thought, is that really an education? Maybe doing so would be an incredibly despicable act for an adult?」

With the hare in one arm, she took out an apple from her sling bag… That must be the reward for me after I complete my lesson.

「Eat this. I won't scold or hit you ever again. After eating this apple, follow me and tell your father. There must be a life other than being a soldier for you. If we explain to him properly, he will definitely—」

My right hand reached out almost on reflex to the apply offered to me— but I clenched my fist before my fingertips touch the apple. I then picked up the crude lump of steel much to her surprise.

「… Teacher. I like my mother's cooking, and ate a lot of it…」

「……?」

「But I knew that the cooking includes hare meat hunted by teacher and my brothers. I can eat that, but I can't shoot— I think that's strange.」

「… Everyone has things they are not good with. You just need to do things that suits you.」

I moved my stiff and swollen lips, and squeezed out a smile for the teacher encouraging me:

「But, teacher… you are not suited to shooting at people. You look sad when you hit me too.」

My teacher's shoulders trembled. I shift my gaze from her to the wind gun in my hands:

「Not just teacher, Sarihas-nii, Sushu-nii, and father too— they are not suited to killing people. They are all very gentle. There probably

isn't anyone in this world who wishes sincerely to kill others. But even so, there is still a need for soldiers. Because wars will break out no matter if we are suited or not, and when it does, we will have no choice but to kill the enemy in order to defend those we want to protect.」

Even a child like me understands that. Just like how we will starve if we didn't eat critters, this was the rule of this world.

「Even I run before I'm afraid, somewhere in the Empire, someone who is more scared than me will choose to become a soldier. In order to protect those precious to them, they will choose to fight despite the fear in their hearts. If so, I think that— I can work harder. I have to work harder.」

I stared at the hare in teacher's arm, and said with a gulp:

「So, please put it back in the cage. Because… that is my dinner.」

After a moment of silence, my teacher averted her eyes from me and muttered:

「… Even this hopeless part of you is like your father.」

「Huh…?」

「Nothing… If you are going to do it, then do it fast. Rather than tonight's dinner, this is actually lunch from three days ago.」

After locking the hare back in the cage, my teacher left with her usual stern expression. Left alone, I said with a smile to my partner Safi that was looking at me worriedly, and said 「It will be fine.」 I then let it swallow a bullet.

After that— I stick the muzzle into the cage with trembling hands.

「……」

The hare shivered in the darkness. It was a life far weaker and smaller than me.

I would never forget until the day I die. That was the first prey I hunted.

「—To—ru!— Toru! Wake up, Toruru!」

The sensation of his shoulders being shook stirred the youth from his short slumber.

「… Big, brother.」

「You awake? Then get up, no time for you to sleep there! Those cavalry are turning back! If we don't stop their next charge, we will get wiped out!」

His big brother's frantic face was right before him. In the youth's eyes, that anxious face overlapped with the poker face in his dream.

As he stood up on legs that felt numb, Torway started to think. Now that he thought about it— many gentle people tried to keep him away from the battlefield. You are not suited, you shouldn't choose such a life. Everyone who tried to persuade him cared a lot for him.

However, Torway couldn't accept the gentle protection offered to him, and had remained on the battlefield. Contrary to the wishes of him and others, he continued to struggle in wars, killing many people he didn't even know the name of, and gets tormented by nightmares of the dead— and his hands continued to be dyed in blood.

— For what sake?

He recalled an earlier question. His father asked why he was standing there? Back then, he couldn't answer. He thought he had not found the answer yet.

If it was Terushinha Remeon, the unhesitant answer would be— to save the nation.

Solvenares Igsem would say without a second thought— to protect this country.

Ikuta Solork… That youth probably wouldn't even answer.

He admired the way they lived true to themselves, but the youth kept thinking. What did Torway Remeon possess? Why was he on the battlefield?

And now— he found his answer. Not from new experiences, but by searching his past memories.

He was on the battlefield because that was a place made for him.

He had always believed that no one sincerely wishes to kill each other. Everyone has a fear deep within them of getting hurt and harming strangers.

Even so, they fight. For the sake of protecting their nation, fellow countrymen, and people they didn't want to lose, they stepped onto the battlefield with hearts like a trembling hare. They hung on desperately to the ideal of a brave who didn't fear death, and the fantasy that heroes exist— they try to fight the icy despair of death with the fake fanaticism created by these illusions.

That was what Torway thought. Hence— the battlefield was made for cowards like him.

「……」

As he walked off his dizziness, his eyes fell on the wind gun in his hands. The weapon that could kill from a distance had been evolved time and again, the weapon made for cowards was right there.

No, Torway corrected in his heart. Be it wind guns, crossbows, pikes and even swords— there were a large variety of weapons in this world, weren't they all made in order for humanity to distance themselves from death?

Despite that, those who were proficient in using weapons on the battlefield were hailed as heroes, and expected to further their heroic exploits in the next battle. As they repeated this process, they probably forgot the fact that they were cowards.

That was why Torway was determined to remember this. And one day, he would let everyone remember that all humans were weak

creatures that feared death. That the true face of war were a group of cowards masquerading as heroes killing each other. And also—

「— I want to make this way of living into a relic of history.」

The moment he verbalized his thoughts, the youth understood his purpose as if he was struck by lightning— and shed a tear for the cruelty of this fate.

If Ikuta Solork was fighting to save Yatori, then Torway Remeon had to battle for the sake of ending the Igsem. He had to refute the pride of the Igsem, and deprive them of their lives.

Because in his ideal battlefield of cowards, there was no place for the dual wielding braves to exist.

「… Is that so? Ik-kun, that's why—」

After coming here, the youth understood the reason why the dark haired youth had always encouraged him, and the meaning of the trust and expectation he held— of all the gentle people in his life, only that youth was exceptionally strict to him. That youth knew that Torway was a coward unsuited for war, but still pushed him to the frontlines.

That was because he was crucial. The youth expected more of Torway Remeon than anyone else, hoping that he would be his partner to relieve the vermillion haired girl from the burden of her dual blades when the time comes.

He thought back on his origins, and understood what he needed to do— facing forward with his gun in hand, the jade eyed youth took calm strides forward.

「Battalion commander, you are safe!」 「Just stay behind us—Huh?」 「B-Battalion commander?」

His subordinates said to him out of concern. Torway shook his head quietly and walked passed them.

「…? Hey, what are you doing, Toruru!」 「Torway, don't go there!」

His brothers voiced their objection too. But the youth didn't stop. He pushed aside the soldiers in the front ranks and stepped forth, his jade eyes staring straight ahead— the enemy cavalry had already started turning around from their charge, and was about to charge again.

「I'm over here! Yorunzaf～～～～!」

The symbol of the past he needed to overcome. He issued a challenge towards One Armed Igsem with all his might…!

For some reason, that shout traversed the noisy battlefield filled with screams and yells, and reached his target.

「— Oh…?」

The old general was surprised. Yorunzaf Igsem probably didn't feel that from the sound, but from the taunting gaze cast his way. He was overjoyed. He didn't remember anyone challenging him like this for the past 20 years.

「– Interesting. A wind gunner dare challenge me?」

The nostalgic feeling of exhilaration made him raise the corner of his lips. His right hand holding the reins creaked loudly, and his legs clamped down on his saddle like pincers.

He felt half a century younger, and raise his voice:

「Listen up! Since he called me out, that brat is mine!」

「「「「Yes sir!」」」」

「He might be young, but that's probably the commander! Open a path for me! Don't let obnoxious fellows get in my way!」

「「「「Sir, yes, sir!」」」」

His subordinates understood Yorunzaf's intent and answered as one. They were all mad lads in the first place, and would have no

qualms as long as they get to fight with everything they got. The legendary Jump Cavalry formed up for the next charge—

「What the hell are you doing?」

Torway looked back at his big brother with a gaze that was firmer than ever:

「I will defeat Yorunzaf Igsem.」

The youth announced as if this was predetermined. In your dreams! Sarihasrag wanted to shout at him, but couldn't. Because he couldn't see a hint of weakness in the eyes of his brother.

「I will take him out in one round. Sarihas-nii, Sushu-nii, please draw the other riders away.」

After saying that curtly, the youth raised his wind gun. Aside from the target and himself, everything slowly faded away from his consciousness.

「I'm the only one who can do it! Because this is the reason I'm alive!」

After seeing Torway's game face of a sniper, Sarihasrag stood there in shock. Silence fell between the brothers.

Unable to take it anymore, Sushuraf reached out for his baby brother— but after struggling with the turmoil in his heart, the eldest son of the Remeon house grabbed his hand with a click of his tongue.

「… Leave him be. He can't hear anything we say anyway.」

「But… big brother.」

「Let him do it! Up till now, no matter how much I bullied him, he refused to change his way of life. A huge retard will definitely persevere in this crucial moment!」

With that shout, Sarihasrag used all the determination in his heart to turn and leave. The eldest son of the Remeon house returned to his post, and directed his unit through gritted teeth:

「Damn it! Stop kidding me…! It's just Toruru, just my baby brother…!」

He filled up the gaps in his formation with his handful of troops, and joined in the ranks himself in preparation of the coming battle. Sarihasrag could see that the enemy cavalry had started their charge.

「Ahh, damn it…! I won't ever be able to show such crazed eyes anyway—!」

Sarihasrag wiped the liquid blurring his sights with the back of his hand, and ordered his men to fire. The sound of compressed air exploding overlapped with each other in a chorus.

—On the other hand, after entering the focus state of a sniper, all the sound became distant to Torway's ears. In the silence of this solitude, his senses as a hunter were raised to their limits.

「… Phew～～」

Defeat Yorunzaf. The youth knew the task he gave himself was almost impossible to do. This meant challenging an Igsem and making him admit his loss. Whenever he recall the battles he fought alongside the vermillion haired girl, he could feel that unfathomable prowess which stopped him from even feeling that victory was ever possible.

If he wanted to forcefully achieve this, there was a fundamental problem he had to overcome— bullets can't hit the Igsem who possess formidable martial abilities. According to his observation, they could dodge bullets fired at him from tens of metres away.

And of course, that didn't mean they could see the bullet or move faster than them. The Igsem could probably judge the time and target of the shots and avoid them. Their ability bordering on foul play made any attempts to hit them seem futile. If anyone could do this, then the vocation of wind gunners wouldn't exist. Fortunately, no one outside the Igsem house could replicate this technique, so there was meaning to the existence of windgunners.

Anyway, a shot from the front would be dodged. Instead of that being a problem, it was more like a precondition. The first plan that comes to mind would be to shoot from a distance, where he couldn't even detect the presence of the shooter. However, Torway's current situation didn't allow for that. Because of the taunt he made, the target was aware of his existence. In any case, it's difficult to hope for a chance for a long distance snipe in a chaotic battle like this.

They were facing each other, which means any normal shots would get dodged. The enemy's movement might be confined to the horse's back, but his upper body was free to move, and could even use the horse as a shield. For an Igsem, this was good enough to dodge this shot.

With these conditions in mind, he came up with a plan— First, Torway closed his eyes.

「……」

Sound came back to him. His hearing was enhanced after he closed his eyes, and the youth's brain started analyzing everything he heard. He performed calculations at the same time. With the speed of the cavalry charge and the distance between them, how long it would take for them to reach. He was more aware of how much time was left before the strike.

There was only one key point to his plan. To not open his eyes until the last moment when the horse was before him. Once he recover his sights, he wouldn't be able to keep himself from staring at the target. If he fired like that, the shot would get evaded. If he wanted to hit an Igsem from the front, he couldn't give his opponent the chance to read the spot he was aiming at.

He could only aim at the very last moment… But there were three uncertainties with this plan. One, his shot might be dodged anyway. Since Torway could aim in an instant, Yorunzaf might be able to dodge at the same instant too.

Two, the shot hits but both of them perish. Torway who would only open his eyes at the last moment wouldn't be able to evade the charge. One small mistake, and he would lose his head the moment he opens his eyes.

Three— could he shoot the target right in front of him without any fear.

「……!」

He couldn't waver. Since overcoming these uncertainties was the only path to victory, there was no point in doubting himself. The die had been cast. Whether he got the roll he wanted would only be known when it was all over.

The Tremors in front of him grew closer. Torway adjusted his breathing, and started counting the seconds as per his calculations.

Five seconds— imagine the scene of the shot. Making the last minute adjustment from his calculations and imagination.

Four seconds— Use his brain as much as possible to draw the scene he would see in the clearest details.

Three seconds— Be prepared in both body and soul. Feeling the gun grip with his fingertips.

Two seconds— Thought about praying to God, but dismissed that notion.

One second— Thought about everyone in the 「Knight Order」.

Zero second— Open his eyes wide.



During the last stretch of the charge, Yorunzaf was bewildered by a strange sensation. The reason was his opponent who was standing in his path with eyes closed.

He definitely wasn't resigning himself to fate, or lost his marbles. A commander that proficient in battle would never show such an unsightly side at the crucible. Hence, he was preparing. Preparing on one shot to engage the cavalry charge— the thought of that made the old general even happier.

Shots were fired at leading elements of his subordinates. The enemy probably had great shooters with them, and seven riders fell in the first 100 m. Fifty metres away from the enemy, his forces dwindled to just thirteen, including himself— But he didn't care about these numbers. It would be over when he lop off the head of the enemy commander. Time rewound back to when he was a fresh recruit, and the old general rode as just a mere horseman.

「「「「「「「Uwooahh!」」」」」」」

The cavalry charged into the infantry formation. Flesh clash against flesh, bones shattered as screams from both sides drown each other out. Their fanaticism was at its peak as the hellish horsemen rampaged without any regards for their lives.

「I'm here, brat—!」

Yorunzaf swept all that into the background and drew the saber on his waist. The youth was right before him, less than two seconds away. He kicked the horse's belly without any hesitation.

His opponent still had his eyes closed. One Armed Igsem attempted to cut off his head as he passed by— but midway through his swing, and his wide open eyes looked right at the old general.

「—?」

His opponent raised his gun in an instant. When the darkness within the muzzle was pointed at him, Yorunzaf frowned— this was

the wrong time to counter. At best, they would kill each other, and the youth wasn't pointing at any critical part of his body.

His blade closed in on the defenceless neck. Yorunzaf was certain that the youth's delicate face would be severed from his body. Because even the old general himself could not change this face.

However— the hunter facing such a fate merely squeezed his trigger once.

「Ughh—?」

A searing heat flashed across the old general's right arm, and the hilt of his saber had a stiff reaction. He looked closer, and found the youth catching the blade with his gun. One last final struggle— but it wasn't a problem. The Igsem blade swung with the force of the horse's charge was unstoppable. It could even cut through steel, and then lop off the head behind it.

The old general had no doubts about that— and the next moment, he was betrayed by his right hand.

「— What…」

A flash of steel flew into the sky. The weapon that supported Yorunzaf's entire life slipped from his hand before reaping the head of the enemy. He never relaxed his gripped. The unbelievable sight made him stared with eyes wide open, as One Arm Igsem's body thrust forth with his warhorse.

「— Ugh!」

After running past his enemy in a daze for a few seconds, the old general realized his fatal mistake. This wasn't the time to just stand around. His back was wide open to the hunter he failed to kill earlier.

「Wooahh!」

Yorunzaf turned on the back of his horse immediately, but it was too late. It was the hunter's turn to strike.

「Shyaa—!」

The illogical and unreasonable twins smiled. One last farewell kiss to the old general they accompanied all this while.

The sensation of lead hitting his neck came to him. An icy chill that could freeze his burning heart overwhelm him, letting Yorunzaf Igsem know that his moment of defeat had come.

When the cavalry hoist the red and white flag, the chorus across the battlefield faded to an end.

That might be so, but the clash didn't stop immediately after the ceasefire was ordered. The chaotic fight from three different faction caused the command structure to fall into confusion. It had well pass the stage in which a commander could stop the fight with a shout. Many of the soldiers missed the timing to stop the fight, and resulted in many unnecessary casualties.

However, the battle ended before the forces were wiped out. As they had already discussed the possibility of this happening during the negotiations, the signal they decided ahead of time for a ceasefire was effective. But judging from the results, the horsemen who rode around with red and white flags shouting 「ceasefire!」 produced the best results.

The figure of them riding around with flags in place of their sabers were very prominent, and left no room for misunderstandings. Unlike the windgunners from two different sides, everyone knew that the cavalry most likely belonged to the Igsem faction, so there were no need to suspect if this 「ceasefire」 was a common consensus. Accepting that the Igsem faction had lost their will to fight, the infantrymen put down their wind guns one after another.

As the battle took some time to reach its end, the soldiers separate themselves according to their forces, reorganizing and tending to their injured.

Torway also directed as a commander, however—

「Ah— Uwah…」 「—I-It hurts—」 「B-Battalion commander…」

— After the grueling battle, he had to face an even harsher truth. The youth's unit suffered many casualties. The sniper unit he nurtured personally suffered heavy losses, with many who were obviously mortally wounded.

「Don't doze off! Can you feel that I'm holding your hand?」

「U-Uwah… Ahhh…」

「We will send you to a nearby town immediately! If you make it there, you will be saved, so hang on…!」

「Ughhh～! Ughh～……!」

「Private First Class Rigui, you are one of the best performers in this battle. Once we get back to Central, I will award you a medal, then we will go to the Hijanka bar and drink until dawn. I will pay for your tab, of course. But if you die before that, then the deal is off! You wouldn't want that, would you!?」

The subordinate Torway was encouraging had been trampled by a horse, the flank of his abdomen had sunk in, breaking five to six ribs. It would be a miracle if his organs didn't get harmed— after performing first aid, he couldn't do anything aside from hoping for the best.

「Shee～!……Shee～!… B-Battalion commander… Will I make it…?」

A soldier that lost a chunk of meat from the back of his head to his neck laid prone on the ground, and asked as if he was grasping at straws:

「Sergeant Loban, aren't you the manliest man in my unit!? If you can't make it, then no one else will! So for the sake of saving everyone, you have to hang on…!」

「Shee～!… T-That's a huge responsibility… I don't want others to hold a grudge against me, so I will hold on…」

Aside from encouraging their faltering willpower, there wasn't anything he could do for the heavily wounded. Although the Torway wanted to scream because of this feeling of helplessness, he kept performing first aid on those who could be saved and sending them off, and listened to the last words of those beyond saving— after grinding his heart and soul repeatedly until the very end, he finally shuttled off all the injured to the nearby town. Including those ferrying the wounded, Torway's unit was at almost half strength.

「... Ah...」

When they had finished tending to the wounded, he remembered that there was something he forgot to do. The youth picked up two guns from the grass, and walked to one of his subordinates:

「......Private First Class Harushin, thank you for earlier. Here's your gun.」

「Sir!... Is it fine?」

「We have spares. We will be linking up with Ma-kun's unit soon, so I will return this to you first...」

Torway returned the wind gun to his subordinate, then looked to the other one leaning on his shoulder— his wind gun that had been bent out of shape when he blocked that blow.

「... Sorry, Safi. It is part of the battle plan, but I still toss you aside.」

「Don't worry, Torway, as long as you are safe.」

His partner Safi answered with a smile when it heard that apology— after blocking the first charge, he toss aside the windgun that had turned into a lump of scrap metal, then borrowed his subordinate's wind gun and sprite to fire at Yorunzaf's back. That was the decisive shot that ended the battle.

「... Alright, it's time to go.」

Torway forced his lethargic body to get up and straighten his back. He won this battle, but he didn't accomplish his mission yet. Their goal in Dafuma Province was to search for the Emperor.

He led a small number of subordinates and walk to the open plains, and a horrible sight appeared before him. As Torway's unit joined the fray in the second half of the battle, their losses were lighter. The Remeon square formation that was on the verge of crumbling, and the Igsem cavalry that charged fearlessly both suffered terrible losses.

「—Sarihas-nii, Sushu-nii.」

Torway called out to his two older brothers. He could see his second brother Sushuraf was lying on the ground with bandages on his right arm, left leg and forehead, a heart wrenching sight. His eldest brother Sarihasrag stood beside him relatively unscathed. During the last cavalry charge, the buff second brother protected the eldest brother as if it was only natural.

「Sorry, we will be going now. That treatment facility should be in the forest ahead, correct?」

「……」 「… I accept your alliance. Do what you want.」

Sushuraf was silent, while Sarihasrag answered with his back to his brother.

They were stuck here as too many of their comrades were wounded. All the survivors had been sent to assist the injured, and they couldn't leave their casualties behind and continue the search.

Hence, they had no choice but to agree unconditionally to an alliance with Torway's group, which was the proposal that they turned down last time. As per the agreement to share intel, they told Torway about the treatment facility.

「Even if we find the Emperor, we won't ask His Majesty to issue an edict that will brand your faction as traitors. From the very start,

we want to end this civil war with the Remeon having the upper hand.」

「… Who will believe that. Don't get in the way of our rescue operation, take your men with you and scram.」

The eldest brother refuse to turn back. Torway hung his head with his mouth shut, and started turning back.

「– Hey, wait.」

As he was turning after ending the conversation, a displeased voice stopped him.

An old man with fiery red hair was standing there with a saber on his waist—Yorunzaf Igsem. He dismounted with his bandaged right hand, and glared at the jade eyed youth:

「Explain this before you leave. What's going on here～?」

The old general said as he touched his neck, the place where the lead bullet hit him appeared to be bruised.

Torway's face seemed ambiguous under his glare:

「Ehh… What do you mean by explain?」

「I can't accept the first and second shot. For the first, You closed your eyes to stop me from predicting your shot— then why did you aim for my hand?」

The old general said as he lifted his wounded right hand up to his head. He could barely move his thumb. That instant when his blade was about to lop off Torway's head, the youth landed a precise shot that pierced the inside of his palm. With the muscle needed to close the thumb gone, the saber would fall out easily.

After hesitating for a moment, the youth answered self mockingly:

「… Because that is the only spot I was confident of hitting.」

「I don't get you.」

「Because I know Yatori-san… so if I aim for a crucial spot, then you who is also an Igsem will definitely dodge the bullet. So I aim for a place you can't evade— and the only spot that meet this criteria is your right hand wielding the saber.」

Torway unveiled his thoughts. No matter how formidable a person was, it would be difficult to attack and dodge at the same moment. The Igsem might be able to do so, but that didn't happen this time. Maybe it's because the slash came from horseback, maybe Torway didn't show his target until the last moment, or maybe the old general never thought his hand would get shot— These factors all probably played a part.

「If both of us were standing on even ground, things probably wouldn't have turned out this way. Because the saber came from horseback, I could predict the trajectory of your arm. From that height, the arm should move around here… and it happened just like the simulation in my mind.」

「… I might not slash at you, correct? What if I run you over with the horse instead?」

「If you did that, you can't be certain if I will really die. To end this battle, you have to force the enemy commander to surrender, or spread the news of my death in a dramatic fashion. So I know you will come for my head. You have the skill, experience and confidence, there is no reason for you to avoid this duel.」

Torway said with utmost respect. Yorunzaf glared even more angrily when he heard that, and caress his neck again.

「If so, that explains your nefarious actions. Then— why am I still alive?」

That was the biggest reason for his unhappiness. He was deprived of his death at the end of the battle. The youth before him had taken away his deep conviction.

「… Because I lowered the air pressure before firing the shot.」

「Are you mocking me? I'm asking why you lowered the pressure.」

As Yorunzaf glared at him, the youth seemed troubled until he suddenly grin. Although that grin looked no different from a crying face.

「It's the same reason why I aimed for your hand.」

「Huh?」

「If I didn't, I won't have the confidence of hitting my mark… When I'm close enough to see my opponent's face, or when I know the enemy, I won't be able to aim properly as my body can't accept killing someone else. Hence… I intentionally avoid shooting at a fatal spot to stop my trembling. I'm confident of rendering someone unconscious without killing them.」

「I'm not your acquaintance. What will you do if I continue to direct the battle after waking up? Even without my hand, I can still lead my men.」

The old general refute coldly. He was afraid, but Torway refused to back down and answered:

「I didn't take your life… instead, I took your pride.」

「… What?」

「In that chaotic fight, I had to keep you alive to minimize the damage as much as possible. Because only you, the commander of the cavalry, can order them to roam the battlefield with the red and white flags. With that in mind, shooting to kill was not an option from the very start.

Besides, you are Yatori-san's grand uncle. That's another reason why I avoided a fatal shot, and the reason behind the second shot. You accepted my challenge as a warrior, and lost to me. Even if you get the chance to turn the situation around, your pride won't allow it.」

The youth's answer turned One Armed Igsem dumbstruck.

Even when the old general showed a face that seemed to say 「what nonsense is this whippersnapper spouting」, the youth stubbornly refuse to avert his gaze— at this moment a hearty laugh interjected between the two.

「Wahahaha! Nicely done, young man! Great rebuttal!」

「Daolon…」

After laughing for a while, the most seasoned member of the 「Jump Cavalry」, who was also the adjutant to the general walked to his superior and patted his shoulder.

「It's time for us to bow out, General. This young chap managed to fool you, so it seems like the nefarious goddess of war had no plans to grant you the death that you wish for.」

「……」

「No matter how much of a racket old men like us makes, the times will keep on changing. Who knew that such a soldier will show up and defeat us? Ara～ living a long life is both joyous and cruel…」

Daolon lamented. After glancing at his sighing adjutant, Yorunzaf glared at Torway again.

「… I admit it's your win, but if that is so, you are being too laxed with me. According to the decorum of war, shouldn't you imprison the enemy general you worked so hard to defeat?」

「Didn't I asked for you to hoist the red and white flags in exchange for not taking you prisoner? And to be honest… we can't spare the effort to imprison you. How should we hold a prisoner that will remain a threat even when tied up and surrounded by guns? That's like letting a ferocious beast loose amongst us… You might not be able to use your hand for now, but I have no intention to try.」

「How pathetic. It's not too late yet, just kill me!」

「I can’t do that either. You are well respected by the Igsem faction, and killing you will earn their ire. It might even affect negotiations in the future. It might be hard for you to understand, but our goal is to mediate for this coup.」

「… Tch… You keep making excuses to not kill people…」

「I can say the same about you, you don’t have to be so adamant on dying…」

「Hahh? What did you just say about me, you little bitch!? I’ll have you know I graduated top of my class in the Military Academy, been involved in numerous secret raids on Kioka, and have over 300 confirmed kills. I am trained in gorilla warfare...」

「N-No, nothing… E-Erm, can you let me off for now? I need to go.」

Torway pleaded desperately. After Daolon patted the shoulder of the old general again, the fiery haired man clicked his tongue and stared at his bandaged right hand as if he just remembered that:

「… I might not be able to wield a sword again.」

「That’s right.」

「Even holding a rein could be a problem. I had been taking care of both tasks with one arm.」

「Yes, that’s correct. But General, injury or not, someone your age should refrain from playing with swords and horsing around.」

Daolon commented mercilessly. The way he put it made Yorunzaf burst out in laughter:

「— Hahaha! You got that right!」

After shaking off the sentimental feelings with a laugh, One Armed Igsem turned back to the youth and walked over briskly. He used his injured right hand and pounded on the chest of the youth who was leaning back in fear:

「Hey, Remeon boy.」

「Y-Yes.」

「Straighten your back. I can't imagine it, but gunners like you will be the mainstay of the battlefield in the future, right?」

「……」

「I know you are hopelessly timid, but you have to show the confidence of a coward. Whether you are brave or timid, humans are beings that move forward towards a lifestyle they have deep conviction in.」

The old general said with a wide grin, and gestured to his adjutant with a gaze. He then turned his back to the junior who had surpassed him:

「Work hard, young chap. I won't give you any warning. In the end, you didn't kill me or take me prisoner, so I will still be a commander in the Igsem faction, and your enemy in this coup.」

「… We will end the coup immediately and turn you back to our ally.」

「That will be for the best— Sigh, try your best then.」

He waved his lone arm and left for real this time. His surviving subordinates waited on the other end for the old general to return, and his fiery hair tied up in a ponytail fluttered in the wind blowing from the side.

Fierce General Yorunzaf Igsem. A man who loved war the most, and rode the hardest in the battlefield. Torway who had bested that Igsem on the battlefield witnessed the historic moment he retired from frontline action—

A group of cavalry rode in the night. In the center of the group that was holding on to the reins tightly Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Kursk was filled with anxiety.

「Tch…!」

A light beam had caught them from behind. An Igsem pursuer with a light sprite had illuminated Lieutenant Colonel Lucika's group with a searchlight.

They were probably light cavalry tasked with tracking enemies, and would be hard to shake off.

They stole a march on us— She knew that there was no point crying over spilled milk, but she couldn't help agonizing over it.

A few days ago, seeing that the search was reaching the end, she shifted the main base of the search towards the south, and was attacked during the move.

And of course, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika took measures against such a situation. Since the three factions were the same province, they couldn't let their guard down along the way… However, she underestimated the scale of the attack.

With the search area dwindling down, and all the factions shifting their forces to the south, she didn't expect the Remeon main forces behind to be attacked by a large cavalry unit.

When they were attacked, their battalion was 2 km from the leading elements of their forces. Due to geographical constraints, the distance between each company was rather far. They would be able to link up just a little bit further ahead, and would be spread out for just tens of minutes. The cavalry used this chance to attack at a speed that rendered the posted scouts useless.

「It will be bad if we get into a fight, don't slow down! First Lieutenant Kumunen, is His Highness alright?」

「Yes, he is here!」

Her subordinate, escort team leader First Lieutenant Kumunen, answered. The figure riding with him wore his hood low.

After glancing at that figure, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika turned her gaze back to the front and grit her teeth.

「I was careless…!」

She cursed her own incompetence for showing an opening at this crucial juncture— even if others mock her for being timid, she should have brought more troops during the move for safety. After all, the one she was escorting could affect the very fate of the Empire.

Right now, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika only had two cavalry platoon with her, which was the escort platoon and a platoon from the main force. They had twice that number when they fled from the battlefield, but that number dwindled on their way here. Fortunately, the pursuing forces had dropped significantly too, and even if the enemy had only half their numbers, she couldn't let them catch her.

「—! I see the river! Follow it down south, cross the bridge!」

Thanks to the moonlight, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika found the shimmering surface of the river, and a way out of this long escape journey.

The bridge over the slow flowing river matches her memory. It was around ten metres long, and more than 4 metres wide, an impressive bridge. Cavalry could pass through easily in file formation.

「Switch to three files formation! Don't slow down, charge through the bridge in one shot!」

Her subordinates switch position on her orders, and nimbly formed up to match the width of the bridge. The moment they were done, the leading riders charged up the bridge. The horses could cover this distance in no time, however— their hasty pace was blocked by the searchlight coming directly from in front of them.

「…? Halt!」

The leading riders blinded by the light stopped. Lucika also stopped the riders behind. They glared at the obstacle blocking their path.

「Pardon me, you seem to be the unit that escaped with the First Prince.」

A young female voice came from the other end of the bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Lucika clicked her tongue. As the side that staged the coup, there was no way she would mishear this voice.

「… You are First Lieutenant Yatorishino Igsem, right. I didn't expect you to ambush us here ahead of time.」

「Due to this trying times, I had been promoted to brevet Lieutenant Colonel. Long time no see, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Kursk. Pardon me for initiating the conversation without meeting you face to face.」

「Since we are the same ranks, you don't need to apologize or use honorifics. We aren't that close to greet each other intimately either.」

「Then let's jump straight to the point. Please surrender immediately, Lieutenant Colonel. Our mission is to rescue the First Prince who has been abducted by the rebel army. We don't wish to fight any unnecessary battles.」

She firmly advised her enemy to concede. Lieutenant Colonel Lucika squint at her opponent on the other end, and racked her brain── she couldn't tell what type of soldiers there were, but there were at least one platoon of them. The second half of the bridge were blockaded with cheval de frise.

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheval_de_frise>

She knew that the situation was difficult, but she didn't have the time to deliberate or have much options to choose from. She managed to put some distance between her and the enemy, but her pursuers would catch up very soon. If the enemy attack from the front and back at the same time, it would be checkmate. To avoid that, she had to overcome this obstacle before the pursuers arrive.

「… Well then, we have to force our way through.」

Lieutenant Colonel Lucika responded decisively, putting her hands behind her back to signal to them.

「A word of advice, it will be difficult to achieve that. For the safety of His Highness, will you please reconsider your decision.」

「For the sake of this country's future, I refuse.」

The 「Ice Lady」 was adamant, and said to her subordinates around her:

「All units to run in circles to gain speed! Cut a path through! After accelerating, begin your charge!」

The units behind had already started to move in accordance to her hand signals. Lucika also tugged on her reins to turn around. At the same time, crossbow bolts were fired from the other bank, and the battle started with the swishing of the wind.

「「「「「Wooahhh!」」」」」

The cavalry who gained momentum by circling around charged up the bridge, and the battle reached its climax. It was clear from the armour covering the horse and rider that they were heavy cavalry, responsible for opening a path in such dire situations.

But the defenders wouldn't falter so easily. Their bolts aimed for the riders hesitating before the cheval de frise, and searchlight would flicker on and off to confuse the horse and rider. It was a plan that made full use of a small number of illumination troopers, a precise and flexible tactic. This made Lieutenant Colonel Lucika bite her lower lip. This felt like a spur with a veteran commander, and not a girl in her teens.

「… However!」

She squeezed her trigger as she said that. Lieutenant Colonel Lucika crushed the enemy's lightsource with her shots, which was the light sprite's 「light hole」. She wasn't fazed by the overlapping light and darkness, and her shots landed with precision. That was to be expected— she wasn't just the top advisor of the Remeon faction, but also the shooting consultant of the Remeon house. She was Torway's teacher, and was a top five shooter in the Empire.

She also accumulated long years of experience. Her reputation as the Remeon faction's wisdom was on the line, and couldn't afford to lose.

As she encourage herself this way, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika shift her sights on the other end of the bridge— the river flowing gently upstream.

Shortly after, the enemy seemed to have noticed that too as a searchlight shone the way she was looking. A few horsemen were trying to cross the river there. They were ordered to move inconspicuously at the start of the battle.

Lieutenant Colonel Lucika used her natural intellect to deduce the enemy's thoughts— Yatorishino Igsem would probably judge that this was a plan to flank the river and attack her from the rear, or a scheme to escort someone off the battlefield. Her attention would be divided between these two possibilities.

When she got on that track of thinking, she would need soldiers and light. Given how the light sources had diminished by half from Lucika's shooting, if they divert the light there, then the bridge would momentarily fall into darkness—

「All units, standby for my next signal.」

After getting her subordinates ready, the 「Ice Lady」 waited for that moment with bated breath. Each second seemed ten times longer— and as she expected, most of the light on the bridge disappeared.

「Now! Charge, break through the enemy blockade!」

The cavalry charge on that order, straight into the darkness with their lance at the ready. Unable to see the cavalry's action, the enemy was late in their defences. The leading horseman charged right at the cheval de frise with his heavy armor.

「「「「「Woahhh!」」」」」

After the third horsemen charged into it, they finally got results. The barrier broke under the pressure, opening a critical path. The riders behind trampled over their comrades body gleefully through the gap— and a wall of fire suddenly erupted before them.

「What—!」

Lucika was at a lost for words. The fire had a blinding effect on par with the flickering searchlights. They must have dosed the cheval de frise with oil and straws in anticipation of the barrier failing. The horses spooked by the heat and fire were reluctant to charge forth, and the cavalry couldn't go through the defensive gap that was created. During all this time, the volley fire from crossbows kept raining down on them.

「Shyaa—!」 「Ughh!」 「It burns—!」

The arrows aimed at the gaps of the armor penetrated men and horse mercilessly, and the cavalry that charged into the cramped stuff couldn't move freely. That wasn't all, the foot soldiers moved forth through the bridge that was now a hellish place because of the fire and the cheval de frise.

「U-Uwah?」 「D-Damn you!」 「How dare you mere footmen—!」

The front ranks of the cavalry started screaming. The cavalry that lost their mobility was ripe for the picking by the footmen. Unable to wield their lances and polearms effectively, the nimble footmen achieved great results with their crossbows outfitted with spear attachments.

「Ughh…!」

Lucika couldn't breath as she watch her men getting cut down with every passing second. She had to admit that she lost the battle of wits. The fight was over, there was no way out. Unless the enemy makes a major mistake, she couldn't turn the tide—

「—?」

She dismounted, judging that riding a horse wouldn't offer her any advantage, and a bright red figure entered her vision. Her vermillion hair fluttered in the wind, and she wield a saber and short sword stained with the blood of humans and mounts. The strongest dual sword cut a path through the cavalry easily, and stopped before Lucika Kursk.

「I demand your surrender, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Kursk. You have no chance of winning.」

Her dark red eyes stared right at her opponent as she made this proclamation. Lucika fixed her bayonet swiftly, but she couldn't refute her opponent's statement.

「Hyaa!」

As she gets pushed to the brink, a scream came from behind her. She didn't need to turn to know who it was. The hooded person was thrown off his mount by the agitated horse. After sweeping the area, he managed to make out his protector and ran over:

「You! S-Save me! Please, please…!」

「Y-Your Highness…」

The man behind Lucika pleaded for his life with no regards for his image. His hood that was pulled back revealed a frail face with sunken cheeks, teary eyes and blonde hair that had lost its luster.

He was the First Prince of the Katjvarna Empire—Laishennu Kitora Katjvanmaninik. The royal first in the line of succession that was under the 「protection」 of the Remeon faction when the coup was stage.

「I will say this again, Lieutenant Colonel Lucika Kursk. Please surrender. I don't wish to continue the battle and drag His Highness into unnecessary danger.」

Yatori demanded again. Lucika who was caught between a formidable foe and her escort target seemed to be in a dilemma.

However, she herself didn't think so. She kept analyzing in this extreme situation to make full use of this chance that presented itself out of the blue.

Yatorishino Igsem. The enemy commander was literally in front of her. If she could subdue her, then there was a chance she could break through the enemy reeling from the lost of their leader.

「……」

However, it was nigh impossible to do so. Even with a wind gun in her hand, she had to be delusional to think she could challenge and win against an Igsem. Lucika had to use her wits that made her subordinates call her 「Ice Lady」 to overcome the greatest crisis of her life.

The smartest person from the Remeon faction was not to be trifled with. Five seconds after grasping the situation, she already arrived at an answer.

「—Ehh?」

The First Prince grunted dumbfoundedly— This was Lucika's answer. She pulled the royal to her by the collar, aim him at Yatori and kicked his back.

「Shyaa!」

All the imperials were shocked at the sight of that. The 「Ice Lady」 who initiated all that raised her rifle without any hesitation. She aimed for the vermillion haired girl, with the stumbling Prince closeby.

The absolute loyalty towards their master was one of the elements that make up the psyche of the Igsem. After researching her background, she knew that Yatorishino Igsem showed these signs prominently. If so, then the girl would lose her cool in this situation. Either her outrage towards the indignant treatment of the royal, concern for the falling Prince, or the selfless act of protecting the Prince who was stumbling into her line of fire— just one of these

emotions would be enough. If the girl wavered just a little, Lucika's gun that had been honed carefully to take out her foes would shoot through that opening—

「—Fire!」

Yatori leaned forward and lowered her stance. Judging that she was preparing to catch the Prince, Lucika pulled the trigger. The shot was just 2 cm away from the Prince's temple. The bullet flew through the path predetermined by the marksman.

「—?」

The woman bet her entire life on this bullet— flew over Yatori's body that was much lower than expected, breezing through her vermillion hair.

Lucika was just wrong about one thing. Yatori lowered her stance not because she wanted to catch the flailing Prince, but the opposite. She swept the legs of the Prince, making him fall flat on his face. It was widely accepted that proning down was the best way to not get shot, and she did that without any hesitation. With the calmness that matches the 「Ice Lady」's forte, Yatori chose to let the Prince bruise his nose instead of bleeding out from his back, believing firmly that this was the best option.

「— But why?」

Lucika was just unlucky about one thing. If it was the Yatorishino Igsem from two years ago, attacking the royal might have worked. But the girl learned a lesson when she was still a cadet Warrant Officer.

The attempted abduction of the Third Princess by Captain Ison Hou. Back then, Princess Chamille was taken hostage, and Yatori had to protect her while surrounded by enemies, and made a mistake due to Captain Ison's psychological warfare. Her comrades arrived in time to save her, but she still learned something from that failure.

「— Hahh!」

Her low stance wasn't just to trip the Prince, but also showed Yatori's determination to close in with the enemy. Lucika tried to riposte the approaching blades with her bayonet, however—

「Shyaa……!」

Her bayonet didn't even touch anything. Yatori charged into her opponent's arms and knocked her hilt into her foe's temple. Lucika vomited out stomach acid and staggered back. Closing in with just one stride, the vermillion haired girl held the tip of her short sword against the woman's neck.

「… You are strong. Not just your skills, but also the heart to search for a way no matter how dire the situation was. You are a true warrior.」

「… Ughh…」

「That's why, please yield. Losing an excellent officer like you will be an incredible loss to the imperial army. I don't wish to see that happen.」

Yatori said with the utmost respect and sincerity. Even at a time like this, Lucika still sneaked a bullet to her partner, and twitched her facial muscles in self mockery— the gulf was too wide. Compared to herself who was crawling on the ground like a bug, this girl seemed so noble and beautiful.

But that was wrong. The girl wasn't showing the way for a human to live, but the aesthetic of a sword without flesh or blood.

How can I stand being bonded by something like this! Lucika thought with anguish pride.

She was prepared to give everything to that man. Even if she had to fall into the deepest chasm, she was determined to push him to the highest peak.

「—Fu, fu…」

And so— Crimson swordsman, for the sake of fulfilling my wish, a despicable woman like me will betray your expectations as many times as it takes.

The wind sprite had finished its air compression. Right before that, Lucika's body fell backwards in front of Yatori. To a bystander, it might seem like her legs had given up from despair, but that wasn't so. Even at this juncture, her limbs were still moving with purpose.

「—」

As her field of vision turned towards the sky, Lucika only looked down for one instant. Yatori didn't move. She was probably confident of stopping any counterattack her opponent might make.

Lucika felt relieved— she could surprise this girl for once.

She fell with her back to the ground, and her body, arms and legs were almost parallel to the bridge— at that moment, the vermillion haired girl 「detected」 a sign with her eyes.

Showing the brightest smile in her life at the sight of the girl's reaction, Lucika Kursk pulled the trigger.

In that instant, time on the battlefield froze forever.

The knees of the vermillion haired girl drop down onto the woman falling back. The soldiers fighting everywhere else on the bridge stopped and stared at that scene in shock.

The two bodies were connected by the blade of the saber shimmering in the moonlight, held in Yatori's right hand. The sharp tip of the blade was thrust into the chest of the woman.



「— Ugghhh!」

The woman who fell onto her back with fresh red liquid splurting from her mouth. It kept flowing out like an open tap, as an irreparable hole had been made in the container that was holding these liquid of life.

「… Really now… Even that didn't work?」

Lucika muttered with a face of disgust. After seeing the result of the shot she took, her slightly raised head fell back onto the ground.

The slender man squatted on the bridge in fear. His teeth was chattering, which undoubtedly meant he was alive.

And— there was a small hole on the railing above his head. It was a tiny smoking hole, but it was the mark of the last failure of that woman.

「…… Why…」

Yatori asked in a deep voice. Lucika narrowed her eyes bafflingly:

「Why…? What do you mean, why?」

「……」

「I won't hand him over. Not to you, Igsem. So, I can only do this.」

The woman said this obvious reason without hesitation. This was the most despicable and treasonous crime a soldier could commit, but she didn't show any remorse at all.

「But it didn't work. I bet everything on it, but my life will end in such an unsightly failure— So in what little time I have life, I will hate you. It has been so long since I did that… So let me vent my anger unreasonably on you.」

Lucika stared right at Yatori and said with a sarcastic tone. The vermillion haired girl couldn't pull out her sword even with that gaze on her. She knew that if she moved, the woman's life would end.

「Hey, Yatorishino Igsem… why do you fight?」

The woman asked all of a sudden, and the Igsem within the girl's heart answered on reflex:

「... The same as you. I fight to protect all the citizens of the Empire.」

「Hah, I'm different. Don't lump me in with all that.」

Lucika's weak voice suddenly regained strength, and her rebuttal tone bore a hint of hatred. Yatori looked motionlessly back at the woman.

「Don't be mistaken. I'm just fighting for the one I love, and has no obsession over the greater good. If that person wishes so, then I'm fine with sacrificing my everything.」

「I'm not doing this to save the nation, or for the salvation of the citizens. Merely because he wishes so... If I don't do this, I won't be able to save him.」

The reflection of the girl appeared on the woman's eyes, and she showed an obvious expression of pity for a brief moment:

「— Pitiful child. What can stopping this coup bring you? Will it bring you happiness? If you continue to protect the Empire that don't have a future, you will die together with it one day.

You won't enjoy the happiness of a woman, and the joy of loving or being loved. You won't get anything in return, and will just be discarded alongside the other rotting pile of corpses—」

Lucika stopped here— and looked at the white half moon shining behind the girl.

「No one ordered me to do so. I followed my own heart, and supported the only person I admired with everything I had... Even though my love didn't bear any fruits, even though I never confessed the feelings in my heart, the woman named Lucika did exist in this world.

This is the only irrefutable fact. Because as I lay here dying, I found from this feeling of mine— the reason that I am who I am.」

This declaration was the last ripple that Lucika Kursk sent to the outside world. After that— her eyes stopped reflecting the light of the real world.

「… Will he be fine…? If I'm gone… He is so frail, but so strict on himself… When he is in pain… can he seek help from his comrades… and let his wife spoil him…?

Ahhh— and the children… Sarihas, Sushu, Toruru… They all bear… their own troubles…」

Her voice turned hoarse as her eyes slowly closed. As her mind fade into darkness, the woman cherished every scene flashing across her mind.

「… Fufu… my only regret… is that… if I gave birth to them… I would probably… be… more—」

She never got to finish her sentence.

「Lieutenant Colonel—!」

Badump… after one last strong beat, the woman's heart stopped forever. Yatori could feel clearly through the saber that a life had faded away.

「——」

The vermillion haired girl pulled out her saber. She didn't even sheath her blade, and just stood there stiffly.

She couldn't even morn. She was not allowed to do so, Lucika Kursk had reached the end of her life splendidly and passed on. She bet her pride and refused to compromise. She refuted, hated and insulted Yatori— she left her sympathies one sidedly, and stepped off the stage without giving the girl any chance for rebuttal.

Yatorishino Igsem was at a loss as she looked at the corpse that she was forbidden from reaching out to. For a long time, the girl stood there with no way to vent her emotions──

When they got the report that the mission had been accomplished, Ikuta, Haro and Princess Chamille came to a bare village located deep within the woods.

Straw buildings were built erratically, and villagers with gloomy eyes wandered around like spirits. Those who could walk were still fine, but there were some staring into blank space as they squatted or laid on the ground. All of them had signs of illness, and this scene made it obvious what kind of place this was.

「We are finally here. Really now, I was getting impatient.」

When the three of them stepped into the village, the pudgey youth immediately came to welcome them. Similar to Ikuta's group, his mouth and nose were covered with a mask. Ikuta ordered everyone to wear mask when he received report about this place, but the soldiers on scene already put masks on without even being asked.

「It's been a while, Matthew-san! I'm relieved that you are wearing your mask.」

「Glad to see you again, my dear Matthew. It seems you ran into a lot of trouble.」

「I have a lot to say, but let's leave that to later. Let's hurry. I feel bad for the residents, but this isn't a place I want to stay around for long.」

Matthew turned and walked off right after saying that, leading the way. Ikuta clarified some details as he followed.

「I didn't expect to reach first, what a surprise. Didn't you ran into opposition from the other factions?」

「We finally formed an alliance with the Remeon faction. The other two factions had not reach yet. This is a suitable place for

defence, and they will need a lot of men to take this place by force… Sigh, I actually wanted to hold this place together with the Remeon faction, but they ditched us for some reason. Word on the vines is that the Remeon faction ran into some issues with their headquarters.」

「Maybe something happened. I'm curious, but…」

Before he used his imagination to explore the possibilities, the Princess shook her head. They needed to focus on the task at hand.

As they exchange reports, the group head deep into the village under the watchful eyes of the residents. Shortly after, they reached the biggest building that was half buried in the ground. Not only was the building method unique, it was a queer place without a single window.

A large number of guards were posted around the building, and a tall slender youth walked out from inside.

「Ik-kun, you are here! Haro-san and the Princess too!」

Torway smiled brightly and shared in the joy of reuniting with his companions. Ikuta frowned at the sight of him, and flicked his forehead after walking up to him.

「That hurts! What are you doing, Ik-kun?」

「… I don't really get it either. Your demeanor seems to be saying『look, I'm a new man now』, which infuriates me for some reason…」

「What are you talking about… Torway is the same as usual.」

Princess Chamille said with an incredulous look. Haro beside her laughed softly.

「Including how unreasonably harsh Ikutasan treats Torwaysan, everything is the same as usual! I'm relieved!」

Her energetic and casual voice made the atmosphere cheerful. Everyone tried to keep Yatori's absence out of their minds. Soothed

by Haro's chirpy attitude, the members of the Knight Order turned their gaze towards the building before them.

「… My dear Matthew. Are they in there?」

「Yes, they are. This building seem to be problematic in the past, I gathered the wind sprites to ventilate it thoroughly. I thought about changing the location, but the other party doesn't intend to comply. He seemed reluctant to speak with us, and is probably only interested in the commander-in-chief.」

Nodding in agreement with Matthew, Ikuta asked the others to wait for him here, then walked towards the windowless structure that had only one door with four escorts… Of the four asked to stay behind, only Princess Chamille followed him nonchalantly.

「Wait, Princess. Didn't I ask you to say?」

「I refuse. Since the opponent is that man, it will be better for me to be there.」

「I'm not saying that you are unreliable… It's just that my relationship with the enemy this time is a little complicated.」

「Complicated huh… it's unpleasant, but I can guess why… and speaking of personal reasons, I have the upper hand. After all, in there— even though I don't want to acknowledge it— is my biological father.」

When he heard this logical rebuttal, the youth gave up on convincing her. To be honest, he thought things would turn out this way. The girl who was always lamenting about her helplessness would not relent on her duties.

「… I understand. Let's go then. Here.」

The youth offered his right hand to her. Princess Chamille shirked away momentarily before taking it with her left hand. When the palm that was two sizes larger than hers tightened its grip, something deep in the Princess' chest pounded painfully.

「When we are in there, do not leave my side. That’s my condition for bringing you in.」

「… Yes, I understand.」

To conceal what she was thinking, the girl nodded quietly in a pretense of calm. The four soldiers in front of them pushed open the double doors. The chain grinding against the sand in the gap made screeching noises, and after enduring for about ten seconds, an entrance that resembled the dark gates of hell appeared before then.

「Kusu, can you shine a Lantern light?」 「Okay, Ikuta.」

Ikuta took out Kusu from his pouch with his left hand, and the 「light hole」 on the sprite’s torso illuminated the area around the two of them. After the four soldiers went down, the youth followed after them with the Princess in tow. The steep stairs extend downwards, and the youth walked down cautiously, careful to not let his petite companion fall.

「……」 「……」

After less than ten steps, they entered a dim space. It was about 10 m in length, and twice that in width, and the ceiling was unexpectedly tall. The four light sprites brought by the soldiers illuminated the interior, and a few wind sprites left inside continued to ventilate the room.

「Oh– You are finally here?」

At the end of the room laid with moist earthen ground, a figure yelped with obvious elation. Ikuta and Princess Chamille looked over at the same time.

They could see a body covered in bandages lying on a makeshift bed. It was hard to differentiate it from a corpse, but on closer inspection, he could see a shallow breath between the bandages. Those who didn’t know would never believe that this was the reigning Emperor.

A man kneeling with reverence on the ground attended to the bandaged man. The smooth textile of his robes that represented his post of a chancellor felt like corpse wax in the dark.

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adipocere>

「As you can see, we are here. It is hard to ignore such a warm invitation.」

The youth answered simply, and he suddenly thought— the Jewel Voice Broadcast mentioned the whereabouts of the Emperor, so if we diciper it literally, then this is 「a place that befits its 900 odd years of history」?

And what irked Ikuta was that this ironic description fits just fine. A secluded village where hopeless patients were gathered. The despair here was much more absolute than anywhere else, given how there was no future here. This existence made him remember the Eternal sprite Tree that was rotten in the roots, and just waiting for the moment it falls—

「… If possible, I hope I won't ever need to speak with you.」

「How can you say that!? I was looking forward to the day that we meet!」

「I know, you have not played enough yet. When you were just getting into it, my dad left.」

As he spoke, the youth felt the emotions draining from his heart. This was his instinct in self defence, as he would go mad if he faced this fox with a sane mind. He knew very well the tragic outcome of the people who had been toyed with by this fox.

「……Solork……」

Ikuta gripped the Princess' trembling hand and strode forth. He was about eight strides from the fox. Close enough to see each other's faces, but too far to strangle him.

「This is so revolting that it gives me anemia, but this is also some sort of fate. I will play with you then, Trisnai.

—Well then, let's hear it. In this vulgar comedy, what role do you want me to play?」

He declared war from that distance, as if he was charging in to cut his enemy down. The fox's unfathomable smile deepened, as if this was the best news he had heard in a millenia.